PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

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HOUSE OF COMMONS

OFFICIAL REPORT

SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT
OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN
AND NORTHERN IRELAND
FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SESSION 1998-99

COMPRISING PERIOD
7 December—17 December 1998

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

IN THE SECOND SESSION OF THE FIFTY-SECOND PARLIAMENT OF THE UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
[WHICH OPENED 7 MAY 1997]

FORTY-SEVENTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF
HER MAJESTY QUEEN ELIZABETH II

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 322**

SECOND VOLUME OF SESSION 1998–99

House of Commons

Monday 7 December 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Eurofighter Typhoon

2. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will make a statement about the development of the Eurofighter Typhoon. [61338]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): The development of Eurofighter in conjunction with our partners from Germany, Italy and Spain is continuing to meet the planned delivery of the first production aircraft to the Royal Air Force in mid-2002. Seven development aircraft are flying and have completed more than 620 sorties. A number of notable milestones have been achieved, including supersonic flight, care-free handling, air-to-air refuelling and missile firings.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Given the changes in policy and personality since the last election, what guarantee can the Minister give the House that the export prospects of the Eurofighter have been unharmed and undiminished as a result of the actions of his Government and some of his colleagues?

Mr. Spellar: What an extraordinary question, not least because it was this Government who took the most important step to ensure that Eurofighter was a viable project—getting the agreement signed and by negotiating and discussing that with the previous German Government. We are involved in discussions—at ministerial level and at the level of officials and defence export sales organisations—with a number of other countries for the future prospects of this extremely good aircraft.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): Is not the importance of Eurofighter not simply that it gives the Royal Air Force an outstanding aircraft, but that it illustrates eloquently the advantages of European co-operation in defence procurement? In view of the success of co-operation in defence procurement, is it not now logical to consider co-operation across defence as a whole? May we hear from the Minister a little more about the Government's proposals for greater co-operation in European defence?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. and learned Gentleman will have noted that there have been discussions and an initiative by the Government to try to ensure that Europe plays a greater role in NATO's defence. We must ensure that we are getting a better return across Europe for the expenditure that is made, by ensuring a greater degree of interoperability and the ability of NATO European forces to act in operations in which the United States is not involved.

Those discussions are taking place, and we welcome the hon. and learned Gentleman's support for them. They run in parallel with a greater degree of involvement in the harmonisation of defence procurement through OCCAR and also with initiatives such as those taken by the leaders of the main industrial countries in order to rationalise the European defence industry so that it can compete more effectively with the United States and co-operate more effectively with the new US defence giants.

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): The House will be pleased to hear from the Minister how well the Eurofighter Typhoon programme is coming on—the

initial hard work having been done, of course, by the previous Government. I am sure that hon. Members will want to know, as will our friends in British industry, whether the Eurofighter will be delivered on time, given the shortfall and overspend in the air equipment budget for the long-term costing in excess of £1 billion. Can the Minister confirm that there is such a shortfall? What impact is it likely to have on the delivery of the Eurofighter?

Mr. Spellar: The hon. Gentleman says that the previous Government put in hard work; they certainly made heavy weather of it, given the time that they took to get to the position that they reached. It was this Government who ordered Eurofighter. It is on schedule to be delivered in mid-2002. We do not anticipate any slippage in that programme.

Territorial Army

3. **Mr. Tony McWalter** (Hemel Hempstead): What plans he has to ensure that cadet-only units of the TA have access to senior and trained personnel from the regular forces and from other TA units; and if he will make a statement. [61339]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Doug Henderson): All cadet units will continue to be affiliated to either a Regular or a TA unit, which will provide the cadets with both equipment and access to senior and trained personnel.

Mr. McWalter: My hon. Friend is aware that in my constituency the TA has been reduced to a cadet-only force. I am concerned about the consequences of that diminution in status for access to trained personnel, especially as it seems that the 29 officers in my local TA are being pensioned off. Will my hon. Friend confirm that it is possible that cadet-only units will be upgraded to full TA units, especially in cases where the nearest units have been closed down?

Mr. Henderson: I can assure my hon. Friend that every facility for personnel and equipment support that his unit used to have will continue to be provided at that location using officers and equipment from other locations.

On the future of cadet-only units, the Secretary of State announced to the House the future plans for the Territorial Army for the period ahead of us. These matters are subject to review over the long term. I have no doubt that any future Government will want to return to the issue of TA locations, as all such matters will be subject to review.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): As a result of the changes announced by the Government, the nearest TA unit to the Vale of York will be in Scarborough, which will pose enormous problems of access to trained personnel and to training in general. The settlement announced last week for North Yorkshire does not allow enough money for the police force to police the millennium celebrations effectively within the present budget. If it is envisaged that it will have to have recourse to the TA—as has been considered north of the border—what provisions will be made for the TA to be given special training for this capability before the millennium?

Mr. Henderson: The hon. Lady will be aware that those who wish to serve in the TA—we want them to serve—will be able to do so at a number of other locations. The police will have responsibility for policing at the time of the millennium celebrations. Any requirement for reinforcements would be considered in the usual way, but that is a prime function of our Regular Army. I emphasise that the main responsibility for policing the millennium celebrations will lie with the police, and they should be able to carry it out.

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): Will the Minister confirm whether the cadet force at Chorley has a future under the review? Has he reconsidered the nonsensical removal to north Wales of the 101 Battalion headquarters?

Mr. Henderson: I have discussed this matter with my hon. Friend on several occasions, and my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary responded to an Adjournment debate on it last week. I assure the House that, when there is a change in the location of a cadet force, we will guarantee that at least an equivalent level of service support, equipment and buildings are made available. Land Command will discuss with the Territorial, Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Association how that can best be achieved in Chorley.

Mr. Mike Hancock (Portsmouth, South): I am grateful for the Minister's comments about protection for the cadet force. Will he carefully consider the cadet force currently located at the Connaught drill hall in Portsmouth, which is due to be disposed of by the Ministry of Defence? Will he also reconsider the relocation of the TA units that are staying in the Portsmouth area from the Perone road depot to the Connaught drill hall? That would kill two birds with one stone. It would keep the cadets where they are currently located, and it would keep this much-cherished building in public ownership. It would also allow the MOD to dispose of two buildings that would be easier to dispose of than the Connaught drill hall.

Mr. Henderson: As the hon. Gentleman will know, I shall be visiting Portsmouth tomorrow. I shall be happy to receive representations from him or his colleagues at an appropriate point in my itinerary. The decision on future locations of TA facilities within Portsmouth will be made by Land Command in consultation with TAVRA and others.

United Nations Peace Support Operations

5. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If the memorandum of understanding relating to the United Kingdom's contribution to the United Nations peace support operations, due to be signed in March, will be available for parliamentary scrutiny beforehand. [61341]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): Our intention to update our existing declaration of forces potentially available to the United Nations for peace support operations, and to incorporate that in a memorandum of understanding, was announced in the strategic defence review. The outcome of the review was fully debated in Parliament. Decisions about whether to commit our forces to particular UN operations will continue to be taken by the Government and will be reported to the House.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer. Given the importance of the

memorandum of understanding and the assurance that Parliament should know in which general circumstances troops should be committed, will he consider either referring this issue to the Defence Committee or having a word with the Leader of the House about another parliamentary debate? I congratulate him on his contribution to the Western European Union Parliamentary Assembly in Paris last week. As some peace support operations are taking place and will continue to take place in Europe, will he take this opportunity to underline the importance and the continuing contribution made by the WEU and its Assembly?

Mr. Robertson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks about my contribution to last week's meeting of the WEU Parliamentary Assembly, which was made in difficult physical circumstances.

Decisions about what troops we deploy to the United Nations will continue to be made by Ministers. We will make those decisions on a case-by-case basis, using certain criteria. Let me tell the hon. Gentleman—well in advance of any memorandum of understanding—that the criteria will include effective ceasefire and the consent of the parties to the on-going political process, exit provision, a clear mandate and possible impacts on any other commitments. That approach will enable us to tailor our force contribution to the circumstances of a particular operation, and to draw on a broad range of capabilities.

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): Has the Secretary of State considered the merits of a truly committed, dedicated, international UN force whose orders, received from the Security Council, could not then be countermanded or obstructed by the Governments of troop-contributing nations?

Mr. Robertson: At the end of the day, it will be for the Governments of the countries that contribute to any UN force to make decisions about the fate of the forces concerned. The intention is, however, to try to create circumstances in which the UN would have on call forces from a number of different countries to deal with events that might arise. Command and control is clearly one of the more difficult and tricky aspects, and would have to be considered in advance; but I am confident that we would contribute British troops only where clear areas of command existed, allowing us both to be in charge of the troops and their safety and to contribute to the military effectiveness of any such force.

Recruitment (Ethnic Minorities)

6. **Mr. Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds, North-East): What targets his Department has set for increasing recruitment among Britain's ethnic minorities. [61342]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Doug Henderson): Recruiting goals for this financial year are for 2 per cent. of all new recruits for each service to be from the ethnic communities. Those goals will rise annually by one percentage point until reaching 5 per cent. by financial year 2001–02.

Mr. Hamilton: I thank my hon. Friend for his response. I realise that these are—rightly—demanding targets, but can he tell me what progress is being made towards their achievement?

Mr. Henderson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising this important question. I can tell him that a comprehensive recruitment strategy is in place, involving the targeting of communities in which there are greater possibilities of increasing the number of black, Asian and other ethnic recruits. I am pleased to say that that strategy is already showing results. During 1997–98, there was an increase from below 1 per cent. to 1.3 per cent., and between April and September this year the figure increased to 1.8 per cent.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): How does the Minister intend to retain those recruits once they are in the forces?

Mr. Henderson: I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for his helpful contribution. We must try to retain black, Asian and other ethnic recruits in the same way as we retain other recruits: through valuing their contribution to the defence of the nation, looking after them well and trying to improve the conditions in which they operate. The same applies to black, Asian and other ethnic recruits as applies to everyone else.

We must also ensure the provision of an environment that is free of harassment and discrimination. That will be crucial not only to retaining the confidence of those who are already in the services, but to attracting others from those communities to them.

Military Training (National Parks)

7. **Mr. Anthony Steen** (Totnes): If he will discuss with his EU counterparts military training in national parks and other environmentally protected areas. [61343]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): We have no immediate plans to discuss military training in national parks and other environmentally protected areas with EU counterparts, but environmental considerations are always taken into account in planning training.

Mr. Steen: Why is it that no other European country ruins its areas of outstanding natural beauty by allowing live firing by the military? Is the Minister aware that, on Dartmoor, we allow live firing on three ranges, which, in effect, closes the northern, most beautiful and highest part of the national park for 10 months of the year, Monday to Friday? Does he agree that it would make better sense to concentrate the Army's firepower at Willsworthy, where millions of pounds-worth of Government money have already been spent, and which is only spasmodically used, rather than allow live firing across the three ranges? The activities could be concentrated in one spot so as to allow the public to enjoy the national park for the purposes for which it was set up.

Mr. Spellar: I fear that the hon. Gentleman is confusing two issues. Areas of outstanding natural beauty that are within our areas of military training are retained better than those where there is widespread public

access—indeed, in many areas with sites of special scientific interest, we work extremely well with conservation bodies and we have commendations from them. We have to get that balance right and we attempt to achieve that. The hon. Gentleman should try to separate the two issues. We look at what we can do to improve access, but, in terms of the conservation and preservation of some outstanding areas and many areas of biological diversity, we have a good record, of which we should be proud.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): As changes announced in the strategic defence review have materially affected the case put to the inspector at the public inquiry into the Otterburn range improvements in Northumberland national park, when will the Government decide whether to reopen that inquiry? If they do, will the Minister give a categorical assurance that the Army's military training programme will be unimpeded?

Mr. Spellar: I do not accept that the SDR changes the Army's case. Indeed, there is a strong case for the AS90. That is the one that we presented to the inquiry. The inspector in charge of the inquiry is considering whether those other matters should be taken into account, but our basic case for extending use of the AS90 at Otterburn stands and is sustainable within its own terms. We hope that the case that we have made will carry the day and enable that important training to take place there.

Dry Dock Facilities (South America)

8. **Mr. Tim Loughton** (East Worthing and Shoreham): What discussions he has had with the Chilean Government about the future availability of dry dock facilities to Royal Navy vessels in south America. [61344]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. John Spellar): My colleagues and I have had no discussions with the Chilean Government about the future availability of dry-dock facilities to Royal Navy vessels in south America.

Mr. Loughton: That was short and sweet, but is the Minister not aware that, in 1994, HMS Brazen ran aground in the south Atlantic, was rescued by the Chilean navy stationed at Punta Arenas and was afforded repair facilities in a Chilean dock? How confident is he that similar help will be on offer from Chile to the many royal naval and merchant navy vessels that serve in the south Atlantic? Failing that, what alternative arrangements has his Department been discussing with other south American countries?

Mr. Spellar: We do not have great ranges of agreement throughout the world about dry-dock facilities. We have ad hoc arrangements, dealt with under the normal arrangements between countries and, particularly, between navies, which are obviously concerned if a vessel of another fleet is in distress. The good relations that we have with our Chilean counterparts—

Mr. Loughton: Had.

Mr. Spellar: The good defence relations that we have with our Chilean counterparts will continue. We have no evidence to the contrary.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): Is the Minister aware that, after using any Chilean dry dock, the ships involved would be required to undertake sea trials, and that sea trials are the only sort of Chilean trial that we believe would be impartially conducted?

Mr. Spellar: My hon. Friend ingeniously tries to tempt me into an area in which the Home Secretary has a quasi-judicial capacity and on which I should not be tempted further.

European Defence Review

9. **Dr. Jenny Tonge** (Richmond Park): What plans his Department has to promote a European defence review. [61345]

14. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): If he will make a statement on his recent discussions on common European defence. [61352]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): We have invited our partners and allies to join us in thinking afresh about how to strengthen both European defence capabilities and the European Union's common foreign and security policy. The initiative has been very positively received, and I look forward to continuing the discussions with my colleagues in the coming months. The agreement of a statement of principles at the British-French summit last week was an important step forward.

Dr. Tonge: Does the Secretary of State think that—despite the Prime Minister's speech at the North Atlantic Assembly and talks with the French a few days ago at St. Malo—there should have been some mention of the matter in the defence review, so that hon. Members could have debated the overall issue of European foreign policy and defence? Is it not time that that policy was debated in the House before it is announced to the press? Is the Secretary of State happy that the Prime Minister is talking to the French but has apparently not approached other European partners?

Mr. Robertson: That is absolutely wrong. We are talking about a call for fresh thinking and not a major revision of British defence policy. A week ago last Friday, the House had a debate on the Queen's Speech that touched on those issues. We have made it absolutely clear that we are talking about a fresh look at the way in which Europe might take quicker, better and more effective decisions on a European defence capability that will be built on several key principles: no question of a European single army; no Commission or European Parliament involvement in decision making; no transfer of decision making on military capabilities from individual Governments; and no undermining or duplication of NATO. Surely, especially after Kosovo, this is a time for Europe to recognise that perhaps we should be thinking much more clearly about how, in certain circumstances, Europe might act, should act or might have to act without the United States of America, and about building our capability so that, if we do so decide, we shall really be able to do it.

Dr. Cable: Will the Secretary of State include nuclear defence in the list of exclusions that he has just given the House? Does he agree that this might be an appropriate

time to examine seriously the possibilities for co-operation on that matter, and that, even while retaining our independent nuclear deterrent, there could be useful gains from rationalising, for example, control and refitting schedules, so that we not only maintained a constant deterrent but reduced our overall dependence on nuclear weapons?

Mr. Robertson: If the hon. Gentlemen will examine the strategic defence review and the very significant and radical suggestions on the nuclear front that it contains for implementation, he will see that, some time ago, we took on board the very ideas that he is expressing. When it makes sense for us to co-ordinate with other nuclear powers, we shall do so. How we can contribute to the general debate on arms control and disarmament is a matter of primary importance to the Government, which is why certain moves were made within the strategic defence review itself.

Beyond the nuclear forces issue is the bigger and more immediate issue of how Europe as a whole will configure its forces—perhaps in the way that we completed our strategic defence review—and face the fact that the threats of tomorrow perhaps require more modern thinking about how decisions will be taken, and more modern forces to deal with those threats.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): May I remind my right hon. Friend, in supporting his European approach, that there is news in today's edition of *The Times* that delivery of the 25 C130J Hercules aircraft that have been ordered is now two years behind schedule? Was he not therefore very wise to indicate in his strategic defence review that he had not closed the door on the heavy-lift future large aircraft project? May I tell him that, if he does go forward with the project, he will find that my 3,700 constituents at the Broughton factory will not only make the wings of a future large aircraft on time but will acknowledge him as a fine Secretary of State?

Mr. Robertson: I look forward, with ambition, to receiving such praise. I again compliment my hon. Friend on the articulate and forceful way in which he promotes the interests of his constituents and his constituency. He is right to point out the inordinate, unreasonable and, I believe, disgraceful delay in delivery of the C130Js. I have taken up the matter at the very highest reaches within that company. It is one of my inherited delayed programmes, but I intend to ensure that British taxpayers get value. Similarly, on future strategic lift, the idea—perhaps even more than the idea—of a future large aircraft produced in Europe is well among our plans.

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): Can the Secretary of State confirm that the Prime Minister said in his North Atlantic Assembly speech that the European Union needs genuine military operational capability and that, on Friday, the British and French Governments signed an agreement stating that

"the EU must have the capacity for autonomous action, backed by credible military forces and the means to decide to use them"?

After the Amsterdam summit last year, did the Prime Minister not describe exactly those proposals as

"an ill-judged Franco-German transplant operation"?

What has happened to change his mind?

Mr. Robertson: No, the Prime Minister did not. Under the Maastricht treaty, which was signed by the previous Government, we moved towards the idea of European common defence. Under the previous Government, at the time of the Berlin summit—when Michael Portillo stood at this Dispatch Box—they set out to create a European security and defence identity inside the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. The European Union, under the Amsterdam treaty, has access via the Western European Union to the capabilities being built up in the European security and defence identity.

I, the Prime Minister and many people in this country of common sense are saying that, if we are to have that existing framework and structure, the button pressed by the EU through the common foreign and security policy surely has to connect promptly, and with military effectiveness, with the capability inside NATO. We have no intention of replicating or duplicating NATO assets—the structures are there. At issue is how Europe should use the assets that are at present available to the maximum effect.

Mr. Maples: That was the answer to a different question, because I quoted exactly what the Prime Minister said after Amsterdam. The proposal is exactly the same as the one put forward then by the French and the Germans. I know that the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister are not consulting each other on this matter, because while the Prime Minister made that statement in an interview with *The Times*, the Secretary of State was telling the House in the strategic defence review debate that that development would take place entirely within NATO, and re-established and restated the Amsterdam position.

Conservative Members wholly support the maximum Anglo-French defence co-operation, but within NATO. Can the Secretary of State explain how an EU capacity for the autonomous use of military forces can possibly be both autonomous and within NATO?

Mr. Robertson: If it uses the European security and defence identity component—the forces that are designed to be in place for use by Europe and can be triggered through the EU via the WEU. We are talking about the same thing. We are not in any way undermining NATO—indeed, we are strengthening it.

Perhaps this is a fortuitous moment: instead of the hon. Gentleman getting deeper and deeper into the Europhobic swamp in which his party seems to like swimming, may I inform him and the House that, today, the British contribution to the NATO extraction force in Macedonia is beginning its deployment? It will consist of a company from the King's Own Royal Border Regiment, equipped with Warrior infantry fighting vehicles. The company will be deployed for six months, and in the initial stages will be supported by a squadron of Royal Engineers and other troops.

The extraction force will be largely European led. British, French, German and Dutch troops will operate inside the NATO command structure in precisely the way

that we would have intended. The House will join me in wishing our troops and their families well in the job that they are going to do.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): With great respect, the right hon. Gentleman has got it all wrong. He sends confusing signals. What is required is not fresh thinking, but action. We have the structures. Is he aware that the Western European Union already embraces the nations that contribute to Atlantic defence? France is not an integrated member of the command structure. The European Union contains large numbers of neutral states. Rather than confusing us with rhetoric, would it not be better to talk about the WEU as the separable but not separate arm of NATO?

Mr. Robertson: The right hon. Gentleman should listen carefully to what is said. The Western European Union can act on the suggestion of the European Union and access the European security and defence identity components of NATO. All that the British Government are saying—although our thinking is quite radical—is that we need fresh ideas on the connections between the European Union's determination of common foreign policy positions and its ability to access the existing NATO European security and defence identity resources.

By streamlining the process and concentrating on building European capabilities instead of European rhetoric, we shall strengthen NATO and Europe's ability to access military resources as effectively as possible in situations that Europe might have to face.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): A year ago, the right hon. Gentleman and the Minister for the Armed Forces, who was then a Minister at the Foreign Office, preened themselves on coming to the House having secured a protocol on NATO in the treaty of Amsterdam. Many Conservative Members, including me, congratulated them on that achievement. That protocol contains a request for the Western European Union to come up with proposals on exactly what the right hon. Gentleman is talking about. Either the Prime Minister is gulling us with a load of waffle about nothing or there is a substantive change under way to what the Government agreed less than a year ago.

Mr. Robertson: This is a real storm in a Europhobe teacup. Conservative Members must get to grips with the fact that this Government secured the first ever mention of NATO in a European treaty. We are concentrating on making that work. How can the European Union, with its reinforced common foreign and security policy, get together the capability to ensure that when Europe wants or needs to act militarily and the United States does not want to get engaged, we can do so quickly, safely and effectively? My announcement on the extraction force to be based in Skopje in Macedonia shows that it is common sense to ensure that we have the proper capabilities in Europe and streamlined structures to ensure that action follows decisions.

Territorial Army

10. **Mr. Robert N. Wareing** (Liverpool, West Derby): What assessment he has made of the impact of his planned reductions in TA centres on recruitment into the various cadet forces; and if he will make a statement. [61347]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Doug Henderson): So that recruitment to the cadet forces is not affected by the closure of Territorial Army centres used by cadet units, we shall ensure that suitable alternative accommodation is provided for a cadet unit before it has to vacate its present site. We plan to invest up to £12 million to ensure that those cadet units that have to move are provided with the accommodation necessary to support them.

Mr. Wareing: Does my hon. Friend agree that, when Army cadet units are located in TA centres, there is a greater enthusiasm which comes from being associated with enthusiastic territorials? The cadet unit at Aintree barracks, close to my constituency, is particularly viable and usually has about 150 members. I fear that recruitment in the area will suffer from the proposed closure of the barracks. I should like a review of the situation. Will the £12 million that my hon. Friend mentioned be sufficient?

Mr. Henderson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I know that it is an important issue in Liverpool. I can assure him that, if a cadet unit has to move, we will guarantee that it will get the same level of support, equipment and buildings that it has at present. Having said that, one has to recognise that there are 1,400 Army cadet units in Britain. Until the statement by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State three weeks ago, 390 of them met at Territorial Army centres. The others met in schools, youth centres and other venues and received support from the Territorial Army and other regular Army units when necessary. Only 90 units have been affected and they have the guarantee that I have just given the House. I hope that that is acceptable to my hon. Friend.

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): Is it really true that the Government are contemplating a cut of one third in the permanent TA staff? Will that not be severely damaging both to the cadet interest to which the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) referred and to the mobility and flexibility of the TA—the one thing that the Government say that they are trying to promote?

Mr. Henderson: We are looking at achieving better efficiency—which is what the taxpayer wants—while providing the same level of capability in our armed forces. That means that sections of our armed forces, such as the TA, have to make changes to achieve a more effective service. Our aim is as simple as that, and it applies to the matters raised by my hon. Friend the Member for West Derby and by the hon. Gentleman. There must be efficiency gains and that will mean some changes in the numbers of permanent staff.

Gulf

11. **Mr. Andrew Dismore** (Hendon): If he will make a statement on the current security situation in the Persian Gulf. [61348]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): Saddam Hussein remains the greatest threat to security in the Gulf. We strongly support the efforts of UNSCOM and the International Atomic Energy Agency to root out and destroy his nuclear, biological and

chemical weapons capabilities and to establish effective monitoring regimes. The willingness of the United States and the United Kingdom to take military action three weeks ago was instrumental in persuading Saddam to rescind his earlier decision to cease all co-operation with UNSCOM. Our forces remain in the Gulf and we are ready to order them into action again if Saddam reneges on his promise of full co-operation.

Mr. Dismore: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his resolve in standing up to the brutal dictatorship in Iraq, but does he agree that Iraqi non-compliance with UN inspectors has nothing whatsoever to do with Israel, as has been suggested in some parts of the Arab world and indeed some parts of the House? Is he aware that, every time Saddam defies the UN, Israel has to distribute gas masks to its citizens because of the risk of chemical weapons? Does my right hon. Friend agree that dictators such as Saddam and Milosevic in Kosovo take diplomacy seriously only when it is backed by the real threat of the use of force?

Mr. Robertson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the likes of Saddam seem capable of recognising the will of the international community only if it is backed up by the credible use of military force. That is why our troops remain ready and willing to act if he will not comply and co-operate with the UNSCOM inspectorate. He has been warned, and I warn him again that there will be no warning the next time if co-operation is not guaranteed. Saddam's non-compliance with the United Nations and his non-co-operation with the UNSCOM inspectors have everything to do with his ambition to dictate to his neighbours and eventually become the major force in that region. We intend to make sure that that ambition is thwarted.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): Since the threat of force some three weeks ago was rescinded, has UNSCOM made real progress in securing access to the most highly classified and sensitive sites for nuclear and biological weapons and weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? Is it the right hon. Gentleman's view that the Tornado squadron in Kuwait will have to stay there over Christmas and into the new year, for ever and for aye, because, seemingly, Saddam Hussein enjoys sovereign immunity?

Mr. Robertson: Saddam's failure to produce certain key documents has not been a good start after he claimed to be willing to co-operate with the UNSCOM inspectorate. We are watching his actions day to day and will make a judgment based on his performance. The UNSCOM inspectorate is building up to full strength and will, I should think, undertake a number of key investigations in the next few weeks. The rest of the world will watch carefully to see whether Saddam is willing to comply with the undertakings that he gave three weeks ago in the face of overwhelming force; our judgment on that will be swift and will involve no warnings to him.

In the meantime, the RAF Tornados based in Ali al Salem in Kuwait, which were visited yesterday by the Chief of the Defence Staff, General Guthrie, will remain on alert, ready and willing to back up with the threat of force the international community's will. They will remain there over Christmas, which will be a sacrifice for the service men and for their families; but the outstanding contribution of all our forces in all the different theatres of operations in which they are engaged is a matter of great pride to me and, I believe, to the country.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): Have there been discussions between United Kingdom Defence Ministers and American defence officials about support for the creation in the Basra enclave, in the south of Iraq, of a liberated area that is sanctions free?

Mr. Robertson: The short answer is no. My ministerial colleagues in the Foreign Office have met members of the external opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime to make it absolutely clear to people in Iraq that there would be a better world for them if Saddam Hussein were not the dictator in Baghdad. We will continue to give that message loudly and clearly to the Iraqi people, with whom we have no quarrel. We will redouble all our efforts to ensure that they get the message that humanitarian aid from this country and the international community is available, that they are deprived of much of it by the dictator in Baghdad and that the sooner his reign of terror ends, the better it will be for all of them.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): The Secretary of State has admitted that Saddam Hussein is effectively ignoring the west's wishes. How much longer will we huff and puff? Is it not time, before we say any more on the subject, for us to sit down quietly with the Americans and such other allies as we have to decide what options are really open to us?

Mr. Robertson: I did not say that Saddam was effectively ignoring the United Nations; I said that, in certain respects, the disclosure of documents was not satisfactory. The UNSCOM inspectors are back and are continuing their investigations; some documents have been handed over. The hon. Gentleman would not expect me to tell the House or the wider world what judgment we will make or the criteria on which we will judge his co-operation with the UNSCOM inspectorate, but we will judge whether he is genuinely co-operating and whether he is genuinely interested in complying with the Security Council resolutions. We will make difficult decisions based on the outcome of that consideration.

NATO

12. **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North): If a draft text of the revised NATO strategic concept is to be submitted for discussion and agreement to Foreign Ministers at the December meeting of the North Atlantic Council. [61350]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): I expect that NATO Foreign and Defence Ministers will discuss issues relevant to the strategic concept at the December meetings of the North Atlantic Council. Drafting of the revised strategic concept is at an early stage. An agreed text will be adopted by the Washington NATO summit in April 1999.

Mr. Chaytor: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. Does he envisage that any changes will be tabled to the section of the document relating to the role of nuclear forces, particularly paragraphs 55 to 57?

Mr. Robertson: The strategic concept as a whole will be a product of consensus among allies, and some people

have raised issues about nuclear forces. I cannot predict or pre-empt the outcome of any such discussion, but the United Kingdom—after a full strategic defence review that looked at all those issues—sees no need to change NATO nuclear policy as expressed in the strategic concept.

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): When NATO Ministers meet in Washington next year to agree NATO's new strategic concept, what chance is there of European Ministers agreeing on the same objectives? What initiatives can the Secretary of State take, in light of the fact that there is no clearly defined European security and defence identity and no common European foreign and security policy? The European countries share principles, but what initiatives can he take to ensure that European Foreign and Defence Ministers go to Washington not only with shared principles but with a shared identity, to improve the chances of getting agreement on NATO's new strategic concept?

Mr. Robertson: We approach the 50th anniversary NATO summit in Washington next year with a consensus view that will involve the Americans and the Canadians, as well as the Europeans, in any forward thinking that might take place on the alliance. The hon. Gentleman underestimates the degree of success that there has been in building a European security and defence identity. He underestimates also the importance of the new, strengthened procedures for a common foreign and security policy that exist following the Amsterdam summit, and their implications. European countries will be able to build on and use capabilities when the Americans and the Canadians do not wish to be involved.

The hon. Gentleman asked what the British will bring to the table. I would say that it is the strategic defence review, which has been widely applauded—I say with some modesty—by countries as diverse as the United States and the Russian Federation, and which has shown how a nation such as this can configure and reshape its forces away from the enemies of the past to the risks and the threats of tomorrow—something from which we hope our allies will take lessons.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Public Buildings (PFI)

31. **Mr. Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington, North): What assessment he has made of the resource implications of National Audit Office auditing of the use of private finance initiatives in the construction of public buildings. [61372]

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission): The Commission meets regularly to assess the adequacy of the resources of the National Audit Office. In 1997-98, the National Audit Office produced four reports on private finance initiative projects, all of which were the subject of reports by the Public Accounts Committee. With the continuing and increasing importance of PFI, the Comptroller and Auditor-General will be making further reports in future years.

Mr. Corbyn: Would my right hon. Friend be prepared to authorise a further examination of the use of PFI, and of its long-term costs, in terms of borrowing and repayment for capital building and the loss by local authorities or health authorities of control of the buildings that they own? Does he agree that there is a danger that, in pursuit of short-term objectives, we will saddle future generations with large bills for newly constructed hospitals, schools or other public buildings?

Mr. Sheldon: There is of course the question of efficiency versus the finance cost, and it should be possible for those in the private sector to meet the extra finance costs by greater efficiency. If they cannot, the justification for the process is largely gone. I understand that the Public Accounts Committee is to publish a general report on the operation of PFI, and we look forward to receiving that in due course.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Pensions and Stipends

32. **Sir Sydney Chapman** (Chipping Barnet): If he will make a statement about the proportion and amount of the Church Commissioners' contribution to clergy and widows' pensions and stipends in the current financial year. [61373]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): In 1998, on current assumptions, the Church Commissioners will meet total expenditure on behalf of the Church of £160.6 million, of which £134.3 million—83.6 per cent.—will go on clergy stipends, pensions and related expenditure. This includes transitional support payments to dioceses to assist them in meeting the full costs of pension contributions for parochial clergy.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am grateful for that reply. Does it not underline the vital importance of the Church Commissioners maximising their assets, albeit within ethical constraints, to meet such a great proportion of clergy's and widows' pensions and stipends? Does it not also put into perspective the recent request that the parishes themselves try to produce more funding, given the significantly increasing costs of running the ministry?

Mr. Bell: Our current level of parochial ministry support of £20 million has been agreed following a long process of consultation with dioceses. We have to balance our support for today's Church with the need to provide long-term sustainable support for future generations. The commissioners are very grateful to the parishes for their generous response in raising giving levels to meet an increasing proportion of ministry costs. We are confident that the parishes will continue to rise to the challenge.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

Government Information and Communication Service

33. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): If he will take steps to ensure that the National Audit Office has sufficient resources to enable it properly to audit the Government Information and Communication Service. [61374]

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission): The Commission meets regularly to assess the adequacy of the resources of the National Audit Office. The Government Information and Communication Service is a cross-Government service of about 1,000 communications specialists employed to engage in the full range of Government information activities. The activities of the service's members are audited as part of the annual financial audit of each Department undertaken by the Comptroller and Auditor-General.

Mr. Robathan: Is the right hon. Gentleman aware of the disingenuous Government campaign that is unnecessarily frightening small businesses into preparing for the euro, even though a maximum of one in 10 are likely to be affected by it? Does he agree that the campaign might be propaganda and an abuse of public money; and will he ensure that the NAO has the money to investigate it, especially in the light of the Neill report?

Mr. Sheldon: As the hon. Gentleman may know, the Cabinet Secretary, Sir Richard Wilson, considers the boundary between party political advocacy and the presentation of Government policy. It is right that he should be in that position, and I am sure that he will draw the distinguishing line between the two forms of activity.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Assessment

34. **Mr. Simon Hughes** (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): What systems are in place for assessing the effectiveness of the Church Commissioners' activities. [61375]

Mr. Stuart Bell (Second Church Estates Commissioner, representing the Church Commissioners): The commissioners reviewed their systems in the light of the Lambeth report in 1993 and responded to all its recommendations, including the establishment of an audit committee. They further reviewed their systems in connection with the National Institutions Measure, which establishes the Archbishops Council for the Church of England. They also take account of evolving best practice in corporate governance.

Mr. Hughes: The commissioners' mission statement is to maximise the assets of the Church to support its ministry, especially in areas of need and opportunity. In the coming 50 years, the second half-century of the commissioners' existence, will there be a way of measuring the effectiveness of the outputs—we can already gauge how effective the inputs are—in terms of the number of people who belong to the Church of England and the number who become Christians as a result of the commissioners' efforts?

Mr. Bell: I can give one assurance: I do not think that I will be Second Church Estates Commissioner in 50 years' time. We shall do our very best to satisfy the hon. Gentleman. For the long term, we have set out policy and financial arrangements making us answerable to Parliament and to the General Synod of the Church of England. Our annual reports and accounts, together with the resolutions passed by the commissioners with reference thereto, are laid before both Houses of Parliament by the Secretary of State for the Home Department, and before the General Synod by its Secretary General.

We have actuarial accounts for only three to four years into the future, but I would hope that the contribution of the commissioners, the Archbishops Council and the whole Church movement will ensure that more Christians, rather than fewer, will be practising in this country in the next 50 years.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission was asked—

National Audit Office

35. **Mr. David Heath** (Somerton and Frome): What recent discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer concerning the current scope of the responsibilities of the National Audit Office. [61376]

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission): I last met the Chancellor of the Exchequer on 26 March, accompanied by the Chairman of the Committee of Public Accounts. Among other matters, we discussed the current scope of the responsibilities of the Comptroller and Auditor-General.

The Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and I pointed out to the Chancellor that accountability to Parliament could better be served by extending the access rights of the Comptroller and Auditor-General to follow public money to its final recipients. I will continue actively to pursue those matters with the Treasury in conjunction with the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee and the Comptroller and Auditor-General.

Mr. Heath: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his answer, which is part of a series of answers that he has given me on the issue. Does he share my exasperation that it is now 18 months into the lifetime of this Government and we still have a glaring hole in the audit arrangements for public bodies? I note that he last

met the Chancellor of the Exchequer to discuss this some nine months ago: would it not be a good idea to have a meeting every quarter day until the Chancellor realises that the hole must be filled?

Mr. Sheldon: The hon. Gentleman makes an attractive proposition that I would be happy to consider. It is important that the House should have the ability to follow public money wherever it goes, and there is a great gap at present. Some improvement has been made and we now have the opportunity to examine how Camelot gets its money, and one or two other organisations. The hon. Gentleman is right to pursue his campaign, and I welcome it.

Post Office

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Peter Mandelson): I wish to make a statement on the future of the Post Office.

It has long been recognised that the postal sector worldwide has entered a new and turbulent age. Competition for business will be fierce. With greater uncertainty will come opportunities for expansion. Change is absolutely necessary if the Post Office is not to fall behind.

Globalisation of postal services, the growth of electronic mail and the internet, changing customer demands and greater liberalisation of markets are the key drivers of change worldwide. The main uncertainty is not whether markets will become more competitive, but how far and how fast.

Other post offices are gearing up for the revolution, seeking greater commercial freedom to do so. Within Europe, for example, the Dutch and German post offices have been investing in substantial acquisitions, Sweden and Finland are free to acquire and invest in other companies, and Denmark has already entered a number of strategic alliances. France also enjoys considerable commercial freedom, and has a wide spread of joint ventures and acquisitions. In Australia, New Zealand and the Nordic countries, the post offices have become independent plcs. Germany has announced its intention to privatise, and the Netherlands and Singapore have moved to partial privatisation.

Not surprisingly, the British Post Office has been demanding changes to its own organisation for years, but without anyone in government, until now, prepared to act. In the face of market pressures from other public post offices, private postal operators outside the monopoly area, other communications media and distribution organisations, the Post Office wants to be in a position to deliver a wider range of faster, more reliable postal services, differentiated products and prices that meet individual customers' requirements.

Notwithstanding its successful attempts to adapt and its current profitability, the Post Office cannot meet these challenging times in its present condition. It must change or increasingly find its business confined to a diminishing high-volume, low-mark-up sector of the postal market, with all the consequences of falling value and shrinking profits and employment base that that would involve.

The Government are not prepared to sit back and allow that to happen. We have therefore decided to embark on the most radical set of reforms since the modern Post Office was created in 1969. In future, the Post Office will be driven by a combination of effective market disciplines and commercial freedoms, which will transform its performance and its ability to do business.

Our starting point is that the relationship between the Post Office and Government has to change. I should make it clear that we certainly do not rule out the possibility of introducing private shareholding into the Post Office—for example, through the sale of a minority stake in it—at a later stage.

However, at present wholesale privatisation would not be a realistic option. It would take a long time to introduce, cause massive uncertainty, and diminish the chance of immediate reform now, which would be the worst outcome of all, as the management of the Post Office have made clear to me.

Instead, a radical new form of public sector enterprise, operating at arm's length from Government, needs to be created. That new framework will contain the following features. The Government's role in the Post Office will be restricted to the strategic level, both on matters of commercial direction and on setting social objectives. The Post Office board will become clearly accountable for its success or failure in running the business.

An independent regulator will be established to protect consumer interests including standards of service; to regulate prices; to ensure that the Post Office is able to meet its universal service obligation; and to ensure fair competition. Once adequate regulatory provisions are in place to oversee fair competition, the Post Office will be able to form joint ventures, enter into partnerships and make acquisitions within the United Kingdom beyond the present limit of £20 million per annum.

The regulator will have a duty to promote competition by a careful and phased liberalisation of the monopoly postal area, while maintaining the universal service obligation.

We will require the Post Office to present a rolling five-year strategic plan each year for approval by Government. That is essential to protect taxpayers' interests.

On the basis of that plan, the Government will agree a profit target for the Post Office and the equivalent of a dividend to Government, as shareholder, in line with normal commercial dividend practice. In effect, that will mean more than halving the rate at which profits are removed from the business. The external financing limit—EFL—for the Post Office for the next year, 1999-2000, will immediately be reduced to £207 million from the provisional figure of £335 million. In future years, the EFL will be on a more commercial footing. The Government will expect a dividend of 40 per cent., in contrast to the recent average of 80 per cent.

That increase in retained profits will enable the Post Office to finance an increased level of investment in the maintenance of its existing business. However, the Government recognise that larger growth investment, including acquisitions and joint ventures, may require prudent borrowing if the Post Office is to grow successfully with new products, partners and markets. The Government will approve normal Post Office requests for borrowing for investment cases that are commercially robust. Separate fast-track arrangements will be put in place for considering the largest strategic investments.

It will now be possible for the internal boundaries, for example, between the Royal Mail and Parcelforce to be rationalised, if the Post Office board so decides, while ensuring that there is not undue cross-subsidy from monopoly to non-monopoly areas. Therefore, approved and transparent accounting structures must be put in place.

The Post Office Users National Council will be given a more central role, and its powers increased. A uniform public tariff will be maintained for those activities that fall within the obligation on the Post Office to provide a universal service. However, the Post Office will be given the freedom to price flexibly for volume users, and, within the monopoly area, the regulator will restrict prices to ensure that the Post Office is not making excess monopoly

[Mr. Peter Mandelson]

profits. That will be a real spur to efficiency, and it will ensure that the general public are paying no more than they should for normal postal deliveries.

We intend to provide statutorily for the newly appointed independent regulator to carry out those duties as part of the implementation of the European Union postal office directive next year. Therefore, I will be bringing forward measures under section 2(2) of the European Communities Act 1972 to put that framework in place.

The Government remain firmly committed to a network of post offices throughout the country. The sub-post office in particular plays a valuable role in local communities and offers real service, particularly to the less mobile. We will set a social objective for the Post Office, and for the regulator, of maintaining an effective network.

The individual business men and women who run the post-office-cum-village-shop often have to be very enterprising to keep them afloat. With the best will in the world, the Post Office cannot sustain a network if it is not used, and nor can Government. However, we intend to ensure reasonable access nationwide to those who need post office service, on an electronic basis or face to face with the sub-postmaster or mistress. As the Post Office will be at a strategic arm's length from Government, we will set criteria for public access to the services of Post Office Counters that will be policed by the regulator.

There has been a moratorium on the Crown office conversion programme. I have now agreed with the Post Office a strategy, which reflects proposals put by the Post Office to the trades unions, of retaining a core of directly owned and managed Crown offices that account for a significant value of the business done at post office counters. The strategy also recognises that some further conversions will be beneficial to customers and the business. That is a sensible way forward, and I am therefore lifting the moratorium.

If the Post Office is to operate on a commercial basis, it must be able to reward staff for their efforts, taking account of the success of their business, but cutting the cloth to fit in difficult periods. The Government therefore intend, as part of this staged process of reform, to invite the Post Office board to come forward with proposals that will, within the necessary context of public sector pay policy, allow more flexible means of reflecting performance in the various parts of the business. It is important that, where appropriate, the Post Office should be able to reward success.

Events will no doubt continue to move rapidly in this constantly changing commercial environment, and further structural changes might be required which enable the Post Office to grow and to meet customer needs and which are in the best interests of the Post Office and its staff. As I said, we do not rule out the possibility of making further changes to equip the Post Office for success, such as a minority share sale or an exchange of equity with other businesses. Those options will be kept under review. We will need legislation in due course, in any case, to reflect the long-term nature of the reform package that we are putting in place, including turning the Post Office into a plc to underline the commercialisation of the business.

The reform programme that I have outlined will provide a balanced package of freedoms and disciplines for the Post Office. I believe that it is the best possible package of reforms available to the Post Office, which to date has been left starved of resources to invest in growth and unable to step up to new market challenges in the way that other European postal services have done.

Over the past year, we have appointed a dynamic new chairman, and refreshed the board with new non-executives with wide and complementary business skills. They have a vision of a world-class British Post Office that aims to be among the most successful in the world. We must give the Post Office the opportunity to bring that about.

Considerable benefits to the consumer will be the result in terms of choice, price and quality of service. We are ushering in the start of a confident, bright new dawn for the Post Office, and are looking to its management and work force to seize the opportunities, putting right the neglect of the past. Everyone stands to be a winner from our reforms, which I will set out in more detail in a White Paper early in the new year. In the meantime, I commend them to the House.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, a statement that has as many holes in it as a Gruyere cheese. It has been so well aired that the whiff of it has been on the airwaves for a very long time. It is sad that he took so long to come to the House to tell us what we have learnt from many a leak over recent weeks.

The Secretary of State and his predecessor dithered and delayed for 18 months while the Netherlands and Singapore moved to partial privatisation and Germany decided to privatise—18 months of precious time lost to Britain by the great vacillators.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mrs. Barbara Roche): What did you do?

Mr. Redwood: The Minister asks what we did. The Conservative Government did not have the majority to do what we wanted and the then Labour Opposition would not have supported us. The Labour Government have the necessary majority, and furthermore the Opposition would support privatisation. If the Secretary of State has trouble with the left wing of his party, I promise him the support of Her Majesty's Opposition in doing the right thing by the postal workers of this country.

For the past 18 months, the Post Office has had to watch as its overseas rivals have bought the pick of the businesses abroad to create modern global success stories. Now that we have a policy from the Government, most of the uncertainties remain for the Post Office. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the Post Office's remaining in the private sector means that it can still be raided when the Government need more cash from an easy source? Will he tell us how many hospital waiting lists will grow longer because of his giving away £128 million for next year in this policy?

The Secretary of State says that the Post Office will have to heed Ministers in its five-year plan and its overseas acquisitions—indeed, he says that it is to be cursed with strategic commercial direction from the

Government. Will he now tell us how that can conceivably be good news for those trying to run a commercial business? At best, the Post Office will move from fighting with both hands tied behind its back by the Government, to fighting with both hands tied to the Treasury. Today's is a second-class statement that will not be delivered on time. The Treasury has inflicted a defeat on the Secretary of State, because it knows that it needs to keep its hands on the money.

In pursuit of that elusive popular election to Labour's national executive committee, the Secretary of State has swapped sides, from being in favour of privatisation to being against it. Caving in to the left on the Post Office may be only a down payment on his party ambition—*[Laughter.]* The Minister of State, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), laughs the laugh of victory, because he has got the better of his boss, and persuaded the right hon. Gentleman to give in, in the interests of his wider popularity within the Labour movement. However, the Secretary of State need not have worried about his unpopularity, for it runs so deep that a single half-hearted and ambiguous retreat will not put it right.

For the benefit of his hon. Friends, will the Secretary of State tell the House when he might sell shares in the Post Office? When will he finally make up his mind on that crucial matter? From his statement, may I infer that he can still privatise the whole business? He has not ruled that out, but he cannot yet bring himself to tell his colleagues that he might consider it. Conservative plans for the Post Office would protect small and rural post offices, and would let postmen become shareholders on favourable terms.

Mrs. Roche: Really?

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Lady should have read my article setting out Conservative policy on the Post Office, which was published months ago in the hope that the Government would learn something from it, and get on with the job.

Will the Secretary of State answer the following questions. First, how will major investment and borrowing limits be fixed for the new business that he is to establish? Secondly, how much freedom does he propose for the foreign ventures that are so crucial to success? In his statement, that point is as clear as mud. Thirdly, will he confirm that taxpayers will be liable for any overseas losses that may be run up by the new Post Office company? Fourthly, will he tell us how much money the taxpayer will lose as a result of the changes over a full Parliament, given that £128 million will be lost to the taxpayer next year, which is the first year of the policy?

Fifthly, will the public sector pay policy still apply to the Post Office or not? The statement is completely ambiguous: the right hon. Gentleman says that it will not, but then adds that the Post Office will have to abide by certain guidelines because the Government do not want pay to get out of control. We need to know whether the Post Office is to be free or controlled and, if controlled, how it is to be controlled. Sixthly, how many other changes to the monopoly will be needed to bring us into line with the European Union postal office directive? How will that affect jobs in the Post Office?

Now that the Secretary of State has a policy on the Post Office, it offers us the worst of all worlds. The taxpayer loses money, while the Post Office still does not know where it stands in respect of investment for the future. That proves that Labour is bad for business. The Secretary of State does nothing while manufacturing collapses; he will not answer questions, and will not debate the issue. Now, he offers the Post Office little certainty. His attitude is as damaging as that of his Cabinet colleague who refuses to back British business abroad, while travelling at the taxpayer's expense. The tragedy is that the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry will not back British business at home, either.

Mr. Mandelson: The kindest thing that can be said about that response is that it should be stamped "return to sender" and dispatched back to Conservative party central office. It was a very lame response, and we have clearly shot many of the right hon. Gentleman's foxes in our statement. It is a bit rich to be accused of dithering and delaying by a member of a Government who spent 18 years doing nothing about the Post Office. At least we have come to a conclusion and announced it. The previous Conservative Government tried to privatise the Post Office and failed, and then ran to ground and did nothing.

It is clear that the right hon. Gentleman wrote his response before listening to my statement. The Post Office will face tough competitive pressures created by us, and will have strong commercial freedoms. It is absolutely clear from the right hon. Gentleman's remarks that, if he were at this Dispatch Box and had his way, there would be full-scale privatisation straight away. Sub-post offices would face closure and rural postal services would face the axe. There would be a queue of takers for the rich pickings available for those able to buy the most lucrative parts of the Post Office.

That is what the right hon. Gentleman's policy would mean: no half measures or careful judgment, but full throttle and full steam ahead for privatisation—with or without the support of Tory Back Benchers. Coming so soon after its die-in-the-ditch stand for hereditary peers, the right hon. Gentleman's statement shows how out of touch, divided, lacking in leadership and unfit for government today's Conservative party is.

Every one of the right hon. Gentleman's questions has an answer in my original statement. Importantly, my statement sets out what our policy means for the Post Office—hon. Members will notice that that was not at the heart of the right hon. Gentleman's concerns or remarks. There will be a new arm's-length strategic relationship between the Post Office and Her Majesty's Government. Do the Opposition support that? We do not know. Do the Opposition support retained post-tax profits at an increased commercial level? We do not know. What about greater pricing freedoms? Does the right hon. Gentleman support that measure? Does he support greater freedom to invest using retained earnings?

Do the Opposition agree with the freedom to borrow for growth investments within the agreed strategic plan? They do not have the foggiest idea. What about the freedom to structure the business as the board sees fit? I would have thought that that was the sort of market-driven corporate capitalism that the Opposition would support. However, they do not know whether to support it, because they do not know whether they are coming or going.

[Mr. Mandelson]

Our measures are good for the Post Office, for its business and for its customers. That is why they will command the overwhelming support of the British people right across the country.

Mr. Alan Johnson (Hull, West and Hessle): I welcome the statement on behalf of not only the Post Office and its users, but the public of this country who want that business to be retained within the culture that made it successful. I remind my right hon. Friend that, when the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood) had his first spell in opposition—which hon. Members will remember was when his party was in government—he was not a great supporter of the proposals of the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) for the Post Office. I shall check the record, but I think that the right hon. Member for Wokingham, along with many of his colleagues, opposed privatisation.

Does my right hon. Friend recall that the previous Government ran up the white flag on Post Office privatisation four years ago? Four months later, they offered their one constructive suggestion about the future of the Post Office in response to a Trade and Industry Committee report, and said that they would reduce the external financing limit to 40 per cent. of pre-tax profits.

Does my right hon. Friend remember the statement being made from the Dispatch Box, and does he recall what happened to that pledge? Six months later, the external financing limit was hiked up to £365 million. That is why the Post Office got into further trouble, after a review that lasted four years. I congratulate my right hon. Friend once again on making the only constructive statement on the Post Office that any Minister has made from the Dispatch Box in the past six years.

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his remarks. I recall what Conservative Ministers said and what they subsequently did in relation to the Post Office, which is why the British public felt so betrayed by the Conservative party in office.

My hon. Friend is right about the right hon. Member for Wokingham. I do not know whether he is coming or going in his response. I checked what the right hon. Gentleman said about the Post Office only this summer. He said:

"The Government needs to think globally. The Post Office needs to form worldwide alliances, joint ventures and businesses"—

that was in my statement.

The right hon. Gentleman continued:

"The Opposition would give a fair wind to proposals that free the Post Office to invest abroad—

that was in my statement—and that the Government

"should start to prise open the Post Office monopoly".

Very wise words, and that is exactly what I am doing.

The right hon. Gentleman made the case for "liberalising the Post Office" and "introducing greater competition" into the Post Office. All this I propose in my statement. He asked for a policy that

"allows the Post Office to expand abroad"—

I agree with that—claiming that the business was "stultified" by the Government's "lack of imagination".

What lack of imagination is there in the statement that I delivered? The right hon. Gentleman describes it as "fudge", but now that he gets the whiff of a Tory party leadership contest in the air, he is lurching further to the right in order to re-heat the old privatisation nostrums of a failed Conservative party.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): We broadly welcome the statement. We have long argued from these Benches for greater commercial freedom for the Post Office, and at last such a policy is being set out by the Government, which we welcome. However, there is a danger that the main issues have been fudged. I see from the statement that there is still a need for Government approval of borrowing. We will want to examine that closely in the White Paper.

We agree with the reduction of the external financing limit to £207 million, but it is a bit rich to call that commercial freedom. The Government's demand for a dividend of 40 per cent. is beyond the wildest dreams of any commercial operator of which I have ever heard. Reducing the Post Office's investment capital will make the Post Office fight for its now open market share with at least one hand tied behind its back.

When the Government open up the Post Office's monopoly to the market, what action will they take to ensure that our Post Office has access to the other national delivery service contracts in Europe and around the world? The quid pro quo is important.

The Secretary of State said that sub-post offices were vital to communities, and I agree. Can he confirm that the Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters computerised switchcard service will be put in place to provide essential income and service support for the Post Office? Is he taking action to overcome the problem of the reduced number of post offices that can issue motor tax certificates? He must be aware that only 3,000 post offices out of 19,000 are allowed to issue motor tax certificates. What action is he taking to persuade the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency to open up the net to more post offices?

The right hon. Gentleman must be aware of the number of branch offices being closed in small communities around the country by the major clearing banks. What action is he taking to press the clearing banks to transfer over-the-counter banking services to sub-post offices, to give them another line of business to make them more viable?

Mr. Mandelson: The Post Office is already undertaking, in co-operation with banks and building societies, a number of pilot projects of exactly the kind that the hon. Gentleman suggests. We strongly support that. It is the way forward for post offices, and they will receive every encouragement from us to continue.

I share the hon. Gentleman's concern about sub and rural post offices. It is clear that, if we were pursuing the right hon. Member for Wokingham's policy of privatisation, we would be placing a major axe over the future of large swathes of our sub and rural post offices. If we were to embark on privatisation now, we would create enormous uncertainty. It would be enough to make many sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses throw in the towel. They would have no idea what the future would

bring. The certainty and confidence to enable the Post Office to plan for the future are essential elements, and are characteristic of these proposals.

The hon. Gentleman referred to the Government's approval for large investment projects. It is reasonable for the Government, as shareholder, to have some residual power of approval. It will give the Post Office considerably more latitude than it has had before, or than it expected from this package of measures.

The hon. Gentleman made a good point about a quid pro quo for the Post Office to buy into or obtain equity shares in post offices in other European countries. That is important, and we must consider carefully what further structural changes should be made to enable the British Post Office to do that. Other European national post offices have made considerably more progress along those lines than we have, and I regret that. We are playing catch-up.

On the Horizon project, the Government are committed to providing a modern, secure, convenient and cost-effective means of paying benefits to customers. That is what the benefit payment card has been designed to achieve, and that remains our objective. It is true that we have been concerned about the substantial delay suffered by the project, and we are monitoring its progress. I hope that it will be able to catch up, and that it will be brought to a proper conclusion and completion in due course.

Mr. Bob Laxton (Derby, North): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement. It will be particularly welcomed by the public, who have expressed their fondness for the Post Office and their keen desire for it to remain in the public sector. It will be much welcomed by sub and rural post offices, as it will give them a sense of stability, and will enable them to continue in business. It will also be welcomed by the Post Office and its work force.

I listened with interest to the entirely predictable comments of the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood). I noted with rye amusement his comment that he had been unable to deliver a majority in favour of the privatisation of the Post Office. Although the Conservatives were in government, he was obviously yet again in the minority.

The limit on joint ventures is being lifted. It currently stands at £20 million. Will that limit be removed totally, so that there is no cap on it, or will it be increased? Although much has been made of the external financing limit and the arrangements by which the Treasury sucks money out of the Post Office, when the Trade and Industry Committee examined this issue, it found that there was no methodology or formula for the process. It seems that, under the last Government, if the Treasury had a shortfall, it picked a figure out of the air, and decided to rip it out of the bottom-line profits of the Post Office.

One thing that will be ensured now, irrespective of the issue—

Hon. Members: Question.

Madam Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman is not the only one to have offended in questioning Ministers on statements; most Back Benchers, on both sides of the House, regularly offend in this regard.

Let me tell the House, for the umpteenth time, that hon. Members should not themselves make statements; they should ask the Minister questions. So far, I have heard only one direct question to the Secretary of State. I want those who are rising now to put direct questions.

Secretary of State, will you respond to the question that has been put so far?

Mr. Mandelson: I will, Madam Speaker—although it is difficult to hold back hon. Members in their enthusiasm for the measures that I have announced.

Madam Speaker: Their enthusiasm can be expressed to the media outside the Chamber. In the Chamber, hon. Members ask questions of the Government.

Mr. Mandelson: I was going to make precisely that point, Madam Speaker. There is a waiting Press Gallery to receive hon. Members' comments outside the Chamber.

Let me answer the specific question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Derby, North (Mr. Laxton) about the way in which the Government will approve investment projects submitted by the Post Office, although I thought that I had covered it in my statement. Let me make it clear that approval will be given for normal investment cases put up by the Post Office. My hon. Friend is right to suggest that the £20 million ceiling will be removed.

The Post Office will be obliged to demonstrate commercial robustness in the projects that it submits, and we shall expect them to be in line with the strategic plan that will already have been agreed between the Government and the Post Office board.

Mr. Richard Page (South–West Hertfordshire): The Secretary of State does not have the excuse of a small majority for such a weak and pusillanimous statement. May I remind him that his party refused to support the then Government when they wanted to present proposals to help, privatise and liberalise the Post Office? Does he not know that the Post Office needs hundreds of millions, if not billions, of pounds of investment, and that his drip-feed of £100 million a year will not be enough? He knows about foreign competition; when will he set the Post Office free? We did it for British Telecommunications, and look at the success of what we did. Why does the right hon. Gentleman not do the same for the Post Office?

Mr. Mandelson: I fail to understand quite what the hon. Gentleman's point is. Of course we are setting the Post Office free—that is the point of my statement—but we are not simply giving it freedom to go on a spending spree, regardless of whether there is any commercial justification for the investment, strategic alliances and joint ventures that it wishes to undertake. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman should suggest, as he seems to, that we might act in that way.

As for what the hon. Gentleman said about "drip-feeding" £100 million into the Post Office coffers, I do not recall making any such comment.

Mr. John McWilliam (Blaydon): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement. Does he agree that this is the most fundamental change—maintaining public

[Mr. John McWilliam]

ownership, while increasing flexibility and competition in public enterprise—since the late Herbert Morrison set up the public enterprise in the first place? Is it not therefore significant that it is my right hon. Friend who is making that change?

Will my right hon. Friend accept the relief of my rural constituents, who now know that universal service will still apply, and that they will still be able to receive their mail? Will he also accept the relief of employees at Blaydon district sorting office who have been campaigning with me, and trying to secure a statement so that they can start planning for the future? May I thank my right hon. Friend on their behalf?

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's comments. I think that people throughout the country, not just the Post Office work force—although they are important; there are many of them, whose commitment to the Post Office I acknowledge and commend—but consumers and customers, will be relieved that at long last we are providing some stability and confidence, on the basis of which the Post Office can expand properly and successfully in the future.

My hon. Friend is right to say that, at this stage of the Post Office's development, it would not have been appropriate or desirable either to go for new-fangled privatisation, or to continue with old-style nationalisation. I have every confidence that, were he alive and listening to the statement, my late grandfather, who was famous for being a great moderniser in his time, would recognise that nationalisation has to move on. It has to move on not to privatisation, but to commercialisation. That is what he would applaud, and I am pleased to have the opportunity and privilege of announcing that on behalf of the Government.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Will the Secretary of State confirm that what he is really talking about is a publicly owned business with extended borrowing powers, powers to acquire other businesses and powers to engage in competitive, if not predatory, pricing? What does he have to say, therefore, to privately owned competitors of that business, which will thus be able to operate in a favourable environment, but can never go bust if it makes lousy decisions on investment and rotten decisions on predatory pricing? What does he have to say to the private sector?

Mr. Mandelson: What I say to the private sector, which I am sure will welcome this development—[HON. MEMBERS: "No."] Well, I have not heard any comments, but no doubt some in various corners of the universe will be eked out if Conservative central office is doing its job this afternoon.

What the private sector will say is that it strongly welcomes the establishment of a tough regulator, among whose duties will be the need and obligation to ensure fair competition. That is the regulator's job. The regulator will be accountable, through me, to Parliament for that job. The right hon. Gentleman should keep his powder dry and give the new arrangements and regulator a chance to work in the interests of the Post Office and of the country as a whole, before trying to shoot them down in flames.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Is it not true that the reason why privatisation was not carried out in the previous Parliament, when there was a Tory Government, is that some Tory MPs from rural areas made it clear that they would not vote for privatisation because of intense constituency pressure? Does my right hon. Friend accept that there is no public support whatever for the Post Office to be privatised, and that it is unfortunate that the Tories do not recognise that?

Mr. Mandelson: I can barely add to my hon. Friend's eloquence. He is absolutely right. To be honest, as a result of hearing what Conservative Members have said, I am none the wiser about the official policy of the Conservative party on the Post Office, but no doubt that will emerge in time as the coming leadership contest hots up.

Mr. John Greenway (Ryedale): In the Post Office Counters business plan, which underlies the Secretary of State's statement, how many rural sub-post offices are expected to close under the arrangement? Is it not a bit rich to keep on blaming privatisation for post office closures, when the existing arrangements are seeing more sub-post offices in rural areas closed week after week?

Mr. Mandelson: What policies does the hon. Gentleman support? I have already made it clear that the Government and the Post Office board remain committed to maintaining the nationwide network in all parts of the country. Does he support the policies of the Government or does he support the views of some, or all—who knows?—of his right hon. and hon. Friends, who want to privatise the network, which would lead to its effective and speedy collapse?

Of course, there is no arbitrary figure that either I or the Post Office board wish to pluck out of the air. What concerns people is access to services, not the number of post offices, but let me make it absolutely clear that that network is going to be maintained. It is going to be maintained in all parts of the country. As technology changes, and as people gain access to postal services without coming face to face with their postmaster or mistress, that will extend the opportunities and services to which ordinary people have access.

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): May I give a very hearty welcome to Postman Pete? If my right hon. Friend's grandfather had heard his statement today, I am sure that he would have repeated his remark that socialism is what a Labour Government have done.

May I urge my right hon. Friend to make his priority not the introduction of private capital into Post Office services but the creation of a partnership between the Post Office and private sector interests, so that the Post Office Counters network—our wonderful, priceless national asset that reaches every community regardless of how remote or geographically or socially excluded it may be—can be used as a platform for provision of a whole new range of financial transactions and services? Will he make that his priority?

Mr. Mandelson: I am very happy to give a ready "yes" to my hon. Friend's question. The Post Office itself wants

to undertake precisely that type of partnership and joint venture—for which now, at long last, the Post Office will receive backing from a Government who are strongly committed to its expansion and prosperity. As for the Morrisonian nature of my proposals, yes, they are principled, open-minded and undogmatic. In that respect, socialism is indeed precisely what a Labour Government are about to do.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Will the Secretary of State explain, first, why there was nothing in his statement—on a business that is very much a people business—about enabling individual postmen and women to develop a financial stake in their own businesses, to become real stakeholders? Secondly—having given another £135 million a year to the Post Office—will he explain what he believes is the real investment deficit? Thirdly, will he explain whether, under the new arrangements, the revised Post Office will be able to invest in enterprises providing communication services that it currently does not provide?

Mr. Mandelson: No, I shall not give the right hon. Gentleman an estimate of the investment deficit. As a member of the previous Government, he would know more than many of his colleagues about the Post Office's investment deficit. It is not for Ministers to determine the Post Office's investment needs; that is for the Post Office board. I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman understands the nature of the new relationship and new approach that the Government are taking to the Post Office. Perhaps, in the quiet of his room, he would like to re-read my statement, as he would then understand it even better.

I should be very sympathetic to any suggestions that the Post Office board would like to make on a financial stake for the Post Office work force in the Post Office's future. There are a number of very good possibilities and excellent options for ways in which we can continue Post Office restructuring and its progress, and that is certainly an option that I should like to consider very carefully indeed.

Ms Jackie Lawrence (Preseli Pembrokeshire): May I congratulate the Minister on listening to both the British public and the Post Office before formulating today's statement? The British public clearly want the Post Office to remain in public ownership, and the Post Office itself wants commercial freedom to secure its future. Does he agree that evidence from a private poll conducted in July 1998 by BPRI—which shows that 60 per cent. of Conservative Members supported the idea of an independent, publicly owned corporation—demonstrates that Opposition Front Benchers are out of touch not only with the needs of the British public but with the majority of their own Back Benchers?

Mr. Mandelson: My hon. Friend is right: Conservative Front Benchers barely know what time of day it is—they are so busy fighting among themselves, like ferrets in a sack—let alone the views of their own Back Benchers. She is also right to say that it behoves politicians—members of the Government—to listen to what the public are saying, which is that they want a successful Post Office. They want it to face stronger and tougher competition, and they want that spur to efficiency and innovation which any commercial organisation needs—they are going to get it—but they also want the Post Office to continue to make a vital contribution to the social life and cohesion of this country.

Both those things will be achieved by the measures to be introduced by the Government. I have absolutely no doubt that the public will not only be content with what we have announced, but want the Post Office to go from strength to strength, even if that means making further changes to its structure and organisation. We are at the beginning of the process, not the end.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the right hon. Gentleman acknowledge that two principal difficulties, which have been flagged up in previous reviews, face commercial freedom in the public sector? First, how can the Post Office be a genuinely commercial organisation when it does not have complete freedom to set its own EFL—its dividend to its only shareholder? Secondly, how can it engage in fair competition with its domestic competitors when—uniquely—it will not be allowed to go bust? Surely those are distinctive obstacles to practical commercial freedom in the public sector.

Mr. Mandelson: The hon. Gentleman might just as well say that he favours privatisation. In his view, public is bad and private is good. The sooner every public service is dragged kicking and screaming into the private sector, the better it will be for him. In my judgment—the measures that I have announced support my contention—it is possible for an organisation to enjoy considerable commercial freedom while remaining in the public sector, as the Post Office does. Other organisations—BNFL, for example—enjoy similar status. It exercises considerable commercial freedoms, but remains in the public sector.

I do not disguise from the hon. Gentleman the fact that we are trying to create a new public policy model of public enterprise through these changes. This is not old-style nationalisation or new-style privatisation, but something completely new and different. To coin a phrase, the approach belongs to the third way of political thinking in this country. *[Interruption.]* Not for a moment do I expect Conservative Members even to begin to understand what on earth we are talking about, because they are so locked into the past. They have not a single idea or shred of new analysis to contribute to thinking for the future, which is why they are over there and we are over here.

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): I join my hon. Friends in strongly welcoming my right hon. Friend's statement on the commercialisation of the Post Office. The decision will be welcomed outside the House by customers, senior Post Office management and the unions. May I draw his attention to an on-going dispute at the Putney sorting office, which has continued for five years? I hope that he will join me in urging senior management and unions at the Post Office to settle those problems as soon as possible, in their new commercial freedom.

Mr. Mandelson: One thing is clear, not only in Putney, but right across the Post Office organisation and its network: the Post Office will not succeed in realising the opportunities that we are creating for it if management and work force do not work closely together, united in their commitment to making these new commercial freedoms a success for the Post Office and for consumers.

[Mr. Mandelson]

Many people will stand aside and judge how committed the work force and the management of the Post Office are, and with what skill, ingenuity and imagination they are able to bring about the full realisation of the opportunities that the Government are creating for them. In the light of that, we shall need to consider what further changes and restructuring of the Post Office may be necessary.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Is the Secretary of State aware that, on the strength of this morning's advance press briefing, Mr. Nick Butcher, the managing director of DHL, said that, if he were an executive in the Post Office, he would be very disappointed, because its ability to develop a strategy that would allow it to be a force in the next decade and beyond is being strangled?

Does the right hon. Gentleman not understand that, by giving way to the Communication Workers Union, to the Minister of State, the hon. Member for Makerfield (Mr. McCartney), and to the unions' sponsor and spokesman, the hon. Member for Hull, West and Hessle (Mr. Johnson), he will come to be regarded not as a mighty Minister, but as a mere dithering minnow around the Cabinet table?

Mr. Mandelson: The hon. Gentleman is on form. I heard the observations of the manager to whom the hon. Gentleman referred, but he is not a executive of the Post Office, and does not speak on its behalf. I should prefer to wait to hear what the chairman and board of the Post Office have to say. I very much hope that they will strongly welcome the measures that I have announced.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Does my right hon. Friend remember the arguments that used to go on in the Labour party about public ownership? Some wanted to move quickly towards it, while others developed the theory of the inevitability of gradualness. I hope that the Government are not developing a mirror image of that approach, bearing in mind the ideas on privatisation expressed by the Conservatives. Arguments have been made about possible shareholdings in future. I hope that the Government are not engaging in that and opening the door in the direction that the Opposition want to go. Many would support commercial freedom within public ownership, but would question moving further.

Mr. Mandelson: I hear what my hon. Friend says. Nobody is trying to move gradually. On the contrary, we are trying to give a sense of urgency to the changes that the Post Office needs to undertake if it is going to catch up and compete with the best in Europe and the world.

That is the challenge that lies before the Post Office. We shall keep its performance under review. If it rises to the challenge, seizes the opportunities that we have created and does well in the form that we are creating, it can look forward to a long and happy future in that form. However, if it does not perform or if there are additional opportunities that we believe the Post Office should take for its success and for the benefit of its customers, we shall not hold it back. We want to move with the Post Office towards its continuing success. We shall keep under review every aspect of its operation.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The Secretary of State said that the Post Office board would be accountable. To whom, and how?

Mr. Mandelson: The Post Office board is appointed by the shareholder—the Government. It will be accountable to Parliament through the Secretary of State.

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): We have had quite a few consultations locally when post offices have been forced to close, not because they have failed to deliver, but because private sector interests have decided to walk away from their business. An important part of my role has been to engage and involve the local community in consultations about the future of their post office or sub-post office. I am glad to say that we have succeeded in reinventing local post offices. Will there be any changes to the consultation process to give local people wider involvement in building a new Post Office for the future?

Mr. Mandelson: The measures that I have announced this afternoon will lead to greater investment in and strengthening of the local post office network, resulting in improved services to ordinary people in every part of the country. I attach importance to what consumers of postal services are saying. That is why we are strengthening the Post Office Users National Council. The regulator will have a duty to make sure that consumers' views are properly tapped and taken into consideration in the future development of the Post Office.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): May I have the Secretary of State's assurance that the model of commercial freedom that he has announced today will be sufficiently flexible to allow local managers to pay the postmen and women working in places such as my constituency, which is a high-cost area, sufficient wages to recruit and retain them in order to reduce staff turnover and improve mail delivery performance? Will it be sufficiently flexible to allow investment in the new state-of-the-art sorting centre needed in Feltham to improve mail delivery performance in my constituency?

Will my right hon. Friend tell the House why his proposals for commercial freedom fall so far short of the models adopted in world-leading postal services such as those in New Zealand, where management can utilise up to four long-term credit lines with private banks, unguaranteed by the state? Those borrowings are free from Treasury spending controls, permission and veto.

Mr. Mandelson: On the hon. Gentleman's second point, those options and avenues need careful consideration by the Post Office board. They will certainly receive a sympathetic consideration by me, too. As I have made absolutely clear, we are at the beginning, not the end, of the process of modernisation of the Post Office. Indeed, I hope that those and a number of other options will be entertained in the White Paper that I shall publish early in the new year.

As for pay, it is not for the Secretary of State to determine the individual pay policy of the Post Office. Of course, its management has to be cognisant of the overall

context of public sector pay, but, as I said in my statement, we want to create some flexibility for performance pay to be strengthened. Whether that descends quite to the level to which the hon. Gentleman referred is a matter for the judgment and operation of the Post Office board.

I hope that, as a result of the measures that I have announced this afternoon, there will be high investment, high productivity and rising income levels for those who work in the Post Office, to the benefit of those who work in the Post Office and those who depend on its vital service.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the same model should be applied to other state enterprises that the previous Government found impossible to privatise, and would benefit from being turned into operations that combined the strength and security of state enterprise and the freedom of the private sector? Is not one example the Patent Office in Newport, which is highly efficient, but hamstrung by Treasury rules that prevent it from entering sectors that are run by the private sector less efficiently and at greater cost to the public purse? Will my right hon. Friend confirm that his announcement today is a fine example of modern, practical, intelligent socialism?

Mr. Mandelson: I have no hesitation at all in receiving and accepting that accolade for what I have announced this afternoon. In doing so, I pay tribute to my colleagues in the Treasury, with whom I have had an interesting and useful dialogue, stretching for some considerable time and resulting in the very progressive and enlightened statement that I have been able to make this afternoon, with the full agreement of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

We shall have to see how this new model of public enterprise works, but I am confident that it will work very well. I hope that, in the light of our experience, we shall be able to apply new principles and new practices of public enterprise across the public sector. In that context, we have made a little bit of history in what I have announced this afternoon.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The right hon. Gentleman referred to the liberalisation of postal services across the European Union. Will he say whether the problem of terminal dues has been resolved? While he is being briefed, may I also ask him to say how the measures that he has announced will enable the Post Office to compete with TNT and the Dutch post office?

Mr. Mandelson: On competition, I made it clear in my statement that I want to ensure that there is no abuse of the monopoly area of the Post Office's activities or improper cross-subsidy between monopoly and non-monopoly areas. I fully accept that those are important issues for the private sector, as is the differential application of VAT between those in the public and private sectors who are involved in the postal service. As the hon. Lady probably knows, those rules are being reviewed by the European Commission; we are actively contributing to that process and to the review of the other matter to which she rightly referred.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Does my right hon. Friend agree that one reason why the Tories are sat over there is that they became besotted with the idea of privatisation, as evidenced by bus, coal, rail, and finally rain? Thankfully, the British people, who are totally against the privatisation of the Post Office, woke up in time, and ensured the Tories' defeat. My right hon. Friend has today made it pretty clear that there is a powerful case against privatising the Post Office, albeit temporarily, but why can he not rule it out permanently?

Mr. Mandelson: The key issue for us was to give the Post Office more commercial freedom urgently and immediately. Quite apart from the dubious justification for privatisation of the Post Office at this stage of its development, it would have taken three or four years if we had embarked on such a course. In that time, the Post Office would have fallen further and further behind international competition, as it would not have been able to enjoy any of the commercial freedom it needs if it is to compete more effectively with the best in Europe and the world.

The commercial freedom that has been given to the Post Office will be sufficiently extensive to ensure, together with the tough competitive pressures that will operate, a considerable improvement in performance—it will vest the Post Office with the ability to succeed in the future. If the Post Office falls short of that ambition, I shall discuss with it any adjustments that have to be made, although I do not foresee that any further changes will be necessary in the immediate future. The Post Office needs a period of stability and certainty in which to build its business; that is what the measures announced this afternoon will provide.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Does the Secretary of State recognise that the question whether the Post Office continues in the public or private sector is at the heart of the issue? As a publicly owned organisation, it will not be able to set strategy or determine investment. In so far as it is in a commercial marketplace, its competitors will regard it as having the protection of a public sector or taxpayer guarantee. Will the Secretary of State confirm that, in terms of the commercial marketplace, the Post Office will not enjoy exemption from the provisions of the Competition Act 1998, except strictly in respect of its statutory monopoly activities?

Mr. Mandelson: The newly appointed independent regulator will be extremely mindful of the competition requirements and of the law that operates in this country. That duty will be placed on him or her by the measure that we are proposing. The hon. Gentleman either has failed to notice or has overlooked the fact that I am proposing to reduce the Post Office's monopoly activities significantly, and that matter will be considered further in conjunction with the Post Office. I hope to be able to give a further indication of how far we intend to go in the White Paper next year, so, before the hon. Gentleman and others in the private sector jump to conclusions about our intentions, I ask them to wait a little longer so as to see exactly what we have in mind, which will become clear in the new year.

Mr. Jack: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The statement that we have just heard from the Secretary of State was clearly of such importance that he felt that

[Mr. Jack]

he must come to the House of Commons this afternoon to advise hon. Members about his proposals for the Post Office; yet, once again, this information was trailed extensively in the media ahead of his coming to the House. I seek your guidance as to what action can be taken to ensure that, if a matter is of such importance that it merits a statement in the House, it remains the case that the House is the first place that we hear about it.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Madam Speaker has said what she feels about how these matters should be ordered, and it is to be hoped that those on the Government Front Bench have taken note of that. However, it is impossible to guard against pre-discussion of events that are known about, and it is therefore inevitable that people cannot behave like Trappist monks. The statement was made here in the House of Commons today.

Orders of the Day

Water Industry Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

4.42 pm

The Minister for the Environment (Mr. Michael Meacher): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Within three weeks of coming to office, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and I held a water summit and set out a 10-point action plan for a better water industry. Since then, we, the water companies and the Office of Water Services have made substantial progress in improvements in a number of key areas. In particular, we have tackled leakage as a priority, and we are looking for a 20 per cent. reduction in total leakage during the first two years of the Government. One of the Government's commitments at the water summit was to conduct a review of water charging. We did that, publishing a consultation document in April and our response to consultation in November, and we now want to implement our decisions in that area.

Since privatisation in 1989, water bills in England and Wales have risen by more than a third in real terms. Since 1990-91, total profits have risen from £1.3 billion to more than £2 billion in current prices. Significant improvements have been made in water quality and the water environment in that time, but there is still a considerable way to go. We want an ambitious programme of investment in the next century to protect our beaches and rivers, to make further improvements to our drinking water and to protect our precious nature conservation sites. At the same time, we want to ensure that hard-pressed customers are not faced with unreasonably high bills.

Our document, "Raising the Quality", outlined an improvement programme, costed at £8 billion to £8.5 billion, to be undertaken by 2005. At the end of October, the Director General of Water Services published his document, "Prospects for Prices", confirming that our programme could be afforded, with substantial price cuts. We believe that we have struck the right balance between protecting and improving the environment and safeguarding the interests of customers.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I have no doubt that the Minister is one of those who argue that it is right to put high taxes on petrol, for example, to promote conservation and the responsible use of resources. Why, then, would he not want to encourage responsible use of the scarce resource of water and to provide a proper source of investment to improve the product in the future by levying appropriate charges?

Mr. Meacher: The right hon. Gentleman seems to have missed the point that the water summit had a 10-point plan, one point of which was about leakages and the other nine of which were about water conservation. We also issued a consultation paper on abstraction earlier this year; we have received the responses, and I hope that we will be able to make a statement soon. We want to put in place a set of incentives to ensure that there is proper conservation by all sections of the community: industry, households and the water companies themselves.

There is good news for customers on the overall level of water bills. The Bill is designed to institute a system of fair and affordable water charges, especially for vulnerable customers, so that we can safeguard public health while ensuring that water is used in a sustainable way and protecting the aquatic habitat.

The Bill has three key aims: preventing household disconnection; protecting vulnerable groups; and promoting increased customer choice. Water is a basic essential of life, needed not only for customers' personal hygiene but for the public health. It cannot be acceptable to allow families to be deprived of access to a sufficient supply of clean water for drinking, washing, cooking and sanitation.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Meacher: I will in a moment.

I recognise that, in recent years, there has been a welcome reduction in the number of customers disconnected. The trend is going in the right direction, down from just over 1,900 household disconnections in 1997–98 to about 640 in the first six months of the current financial year. The figures are encouraging, but we should not forget that any disconnection can lead to significant deprivation, social exclusion and risks to the health of the whole community, not only the families who are cut off.

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire) *rose—*

Mr. Leigh *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I give way to the hon. Gentleman who asked me first.

Mr. Leigh: I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.

Obviously, disconnections are to be regretted but, as the Minster said, there were only 640 out of a nation of perhaps 30 million households. Does he at least acknowledge that, if we cease the threat of disconnection, the number of people who act irresponsibly and refuse to pay their water bills may well—indeed, almost certainly will—increase, and that what we do in the House, be it on taxes, benefits or any other matter, affects people's behaviour and whether they act responsibly?

Mr. Meacher: Of course I am concerned about the small number of people who can pay but leave it to the last moment or who refuse to pay, but, before the Bill was conceived, nine of the 27 water companies, of their own free volition, had already decided to dispense with disconnection. Indeed, that number has increased from six to nine this year. Of course we strongly support water companies having the power to obtain the money that is due to them and I am keen that they should pursue that vigorously.

Mr. Allan Rogers (Rhondda): The right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) gave the impression that people deliberately do not pay their bills, but such behaviour is rare. After privatisation of the water industry, the experience in my constituency was that old-age pensioners who had had their tariffs fixed on the old rateable value and then moved into part-sheltered accommodation found that they had to pay four to five times the charge. They could not find the money to pay their bills and were in great difficulties. When I brought that matter up with Welsh Water, as it was then, it said that it could not vary the charge and the pensioners had to pay. Like most privatised companies, it had no way to help old-age pensioners to pay their bills.

Mr. Meacher: I am sure that my hon. Friend is correct.

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): *rose—*

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: Hold on. I have been asked a question and I intend to answer it. I would be the first to recognise that a tiny number of people simply refuse to pay until they are forced to do so, but I suspect that a majority of those who do not pay are very poor, and include many pensioners and unemployed. How many Conservative Members know the level of income support for an adult over 25? Can any Conservative Member tell the House what it is? Perhaps I may assist them. The level of income support for up to 10 million people is £50.35 a week, leaving aside housing benefit. Many people find it extraordinarily difficult to meet many of their basic bills, and the Government—unlike the Conservatives—believe that it is wrong to penalise people who cannot pay.

Mr. Burns: In answer to the intervention by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Mr. Rogers), the Minister said that his hon. Friend was right. Will he correct the record for the House and accept that—after privatisation and continuing this year—the number of disconnections by private water companies has fallen dramatically compared to when the industry was nationalised? In saying that his hon. Friend was right, the Minister has failed to explain to the House that many of the private water companies have schemes designed to help pensioners and the less well-off.

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman fails to understand the line of my reasoning. I am not obliged to correct anything, because I have never denied the points that he makes. I said clearly that there had been a welcome reduction in the number of households that face disconnection.

Mr. Burns: You said that the hon. Member for Rhondda was right.

Mr. Meacher: If the hon. Gentleman wants an answer, he should listen to it. Many pensioners are under great pressure because of their low incomes and a number are threatened with disconnection for that reason. However, that is entirely consistent with the fact that some water companies have introduced devices to help pensioners with their water bills. I think that about six out of the 27 companies have charitable trusts. Many regard themselves as running businesses, not providing social assistance to disadvantaged groups. I am concerned to protect everyone who properly needs protection, as that does not happen at present.

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I want to make one more point. More than half of the 640—a small number, but it is highly

[Mr. Meacher]

significant if one is in that group, and it is cold comfort to be told that it amounts to less than 0.1 per cent. of the total—had no water supply for more than 48 hours. Perhaps hon. Members will think what that means. People cannot pay and they have no water to flush the loo, to drink or to wash themselves or their household objects.

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I will give way in a moment. Not only have more than half those people been disconnected for more than 48 hours, but our evidence shows that one third of them may have been cut off for more than four weeks. Is that a policy that Conservative Members believe is justified?

Mr. Gray: I think that the figures that the Minister used have been disputed. I believe that I am right in saying that two thirds, rather than half, of the 640 were reconnected within 48 hours. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman could check that out. More important, will he advise the House how many of the 640 disconnections this year were schools and hospitals, which are exempt under the Bill, how many were second homes and how many were empty properties?

Mr. Meacher: Yes, we will certainly try to supply those figures. I think that those groups are a small proportion of the total. Under the Bill, schools and hospitals could not be disconnected, but second homes would still be liable to disconnection. The Bill concerns principal or only homes, but I will find out whether the evidence that the hon. Gentleman wants can be provided. I am sure that my figures are correct and that more than half those disconnected had no water supply for more than 48 hours.

Mr. Gray *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman can make his own speech in due course.

I do not find it tolerable or acceptable to expect consumers to live without water for such a significant period and I stand firmly by that principle. Therefore, we propose to prevent water companies from disconnecting customers in their principal or only home for non-payment. Nor do we consider that disconnection should be allowed for schools and hospitals, which provide vital services to the communities in which they are located.

Those proposals reflect—perhaps Conservative Members will reflect on this—present practice in much of the industry. There has never been provision for disconnection for failure to pay sewerage bills. As I said, nine water companies in England and Wales did not disconnect any households for failure to pay water service bills in the first half of this year and there is no threat of disconnection—nor has there ever been—for non-payment in Scotland or Northern Ireland. If those water companies, in such important and large parts of our country, can do without disconnection and run a perfectly good water service, that can be true throughout the country. The proposals should not have a major impact on water companies because of the relatively small number of disconnections.

Of course, we firmly believe that water companies have a right to the moneys that customers owe them and we vigorously support their recovering debts to which they are entitled. Companies will continue to be able to use a range of procedures to enforce payment of water bills, such as the use of bailiffs to recover money or goods and of attachment of earnings orders, garnishee orders or charging orders. Any such procedure incurs court charges, which are added to the debt to be paid. That is a significant disincentive to any non-payer who can pay, so the proposals clearly do not represent a soft option for customers. Under the Bill, there is no easy way out for non-payers who can pay.

Since we first announced our proposals to prohibit disconnection, several companies have been considering the use of devices such as trickle valves, which reduce flow to properties and cause significant inconvenience to customers, with the intention of enforcing payment. I hope that I have shown that our policies on disconnection reflect a deeply held concern about the health and hygiene implications if customers are deprived of a good supply of clean water. In line with that principle, I believe that we also need to act against the possible use of limiting devices as an alternative to disconnection. The Bill therefore makes specific provision to ensure that customers' well-being is not put at risk by the use of such devices.

Clauses 1 and 2 demonstrate the high priority that we attach to tackling the risks to public health of depriving customers of their water supply for non-payment. In view of our strong welfare concerns on the issue, we propose that the clauses should be commenced on Royal Assent.

My second theme is protecting vulnerable customers. Water bills will continue to be a significant expense for many customers, and we fear that certain groups of customers who have high unavoidable use of water could face particular hardship if they live in a property without a water meter. We therefore believe that carefully targeted protection needs to be offered to those groups. We propose to offer protection to two: large families on low incomes; and those with medical conditions requiring a high use of water.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): My right hon. Friend is doubtless aware of the innovative schemes that some water companies have introduced. Anglian Water, which covers my constituency, has charging schemes for precisely the groups that he mentioned. Will he bear in mind the need to allow water companies to have their own innovative schemes that relate to their locality and so avoid a straitjacket that would mean that every water company would have to have exactly the same scheme for its vulnerable customers?

Mr. Meacher: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for raising that point. We are keen not only on the use of innovative tariffs, such as the rising block tariffs that are starting to be adopted and that we would like to be more widely applied, but on water companies advertising a range of methods and places of payment to make it easier. As the Opposition have hinted, we would like more water companies to develop charitable trusts. Those are all valuable ways of enabling people to meet their due water charges.

For the first group that I mentioned, we propose that protection should be available to families with three or more children in receipt of one of the following benefits: income support; income-based job seeker's allowance; family credit; disability working allowance; housing benefit; and council tax benefit.

For the second group, we propose that protection should be offered to those with conditions such as desquamating or weeping skin diseases, incontinence, abdominal stomas, ileostomies and colostomies, and renal failure requiring home dialysis. We propose that, to gain protection, customers would have to certify to the water company that they suffer from one of those conditions which causes them to need an unusually high amount of water. Of course, it would be open to water companies to verify information provided by customers.

We consider that the protection offered to those groups should be to have the option of a bill based on an average measured charge for the water company from which they receive their supply. That will ensure that customers with a high unavoidable use of water do not face unreasonably high charges related to the water that they consume, as that could give rise to hardship. I hope that that commands the acceptance of both sides of the House.

There are further ways in which water companies can assist vulnerable groups, as I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) when she mentioned Anglian Water, which has introduced a special tariff that can be advantageous for families in receipt of benefit. I want to encourage all companies to consider how they can reflect social concerns in their charging and billing arrangements. Such initiatives offer water companies an excellent opportunity to demonstrate that they have regard for the interests of all consumers in a business that occupies a prominent position in the community.

Mr. Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, who has not yet asked me a question.

Mr. Heath: I am following the Minister's argument closely. He proposes the extension of the use of rateable value as a mechanism. Is there a mechanism in the Bill that will in any way relate the notional rateable value either to the current property value or to the ability to pay? Is there a mechanism to deal with single occupancy of larger premises? If the answer to both those questions is no, am I right to assume that the only option for people who feel that they are disadvantaged by the proposals is to move to having a meter?

Mr. Meacher: I shall come to the question of rateable value shortly. It will be better if the hon. Gentleman listens to what I say and then responds. On his second question, he has a fair point. As I am sure that he already knows from having read the Bill, it contains no specific provision on that matter. There is the option to apply for a meter, and we are making it easier for people to take up that option if that is what they want.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): Will the Minister give way on the point of rateable value?

Mr. Meacher: I am not on the point of rateable value. I am still on my third theme, which is increasing customer choice.

Mr. Bottomley: My question relates to the right hon. Gentleman's response to the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Mr. Heath)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The Minister has not given way.

Mr. Meacher: The reason I have not given way, Mr. Deputy Speaker, is that I am going to address the matter of rateable value later in my speech. If the hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) wants to question me at that stage, I shall be happy to answer him.

Mr. Gray: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: No, I want to make progress. The hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) has already asked a question and many other hon. Members want to speak.

For many customers, there is little or no choice in charging arrangements; that fact is reflected in my postbag, and, I am sure, in those of many other hon. Members. I have received representations from some customers who are concerned that they may be forced by water companies to move to a measured charge—for example, because water companies fit a meter as part of associated works on pipes, or because water companies compulsorily meter whole areas. I also receive representations from customers who would like to have a meter, but who find that they are charged up to £150 for having one installed, which is an up-front cost that many less-well-off customers find unaffordable.

The Bill provides new rights for customers to remain on an unmeasured charge in their present home if they are using water only for normal domestic purposes. It proposes that the Secretary of State will have powers to specify particular cases in which water companies will be able to require customers to pay on a measured basis, for instance, where customers are using significant quantities of water for what we call discretionary purposes—a sprinkler, a swimming pool and so on—so that such customers understand the cost of the resources that they are consuming and have the right incentives to economise on discretionary water use.

Premises covered by that provision would include those that are used for commercial purposes, those where there is a garden sprinkler or swimming pool in use, those that have a power shower—which is defined as one consuming more than 20 litres a minute—and those using a water- softening unit that requires backwashing. Let me make it clear that the power would be an enabling power and that nothing in the Bill places an obligation on water companies to impose meters in any case. In addition, where water companies want to identify customers using water for discretionary purposes, we look to them to do so without taking an unduly intrusive approach.

[Mr. Meacher]

I hope that I shall be able to make my statement on the question of rateable value before being asked a question. The vast majority of customers paying unmeasured charges do so on the basis of rateable values. Under current legislation, water companies would be prohibited from calculating charges in that way after 31 March 2000. The previous Government clearly intended to impose compulsory universal metering from that date.

Mr. Burns: What proof does the Minister have for that statement?

Mr. Meacher: There would be no other basis for charging after that date.

Mr. Burns: What proof can the Minister present to the House that that statement is factually correct?

Mr. Meacher: I have already made it absolutely clear that the previous Government intended to end the use of rateable values after 31 March 2000. That is the current position and that is exactly why we have put a measure in the Bill to remove that limit.

Mr. Burns *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: I am sorry, but I will not give way again. The hon. Gentleman can respond to that point when he makes his own speech. The position is absolutely clear.

We reject that approach: we believe in choice and in proceeding by persuasion. That is why the Bill removes that deadline. The legislation will offer stability to customers and companies, protect households from any sudden upheaval and avoid the costs associated with an immediate and widespread change in the charging basis.

On the point raised by the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome, let me say that we recognise that the use of rateable values has significant drawbacks. The values were set some time ago, there is no mechanism for appealing against a value set for a particular property and there are no rateable values for houses built since 1990.

Therefore, it is understandable that some water companies and others are interested in developing alternative charging options. The option most commonly put to us is to allow charging based on council tax bands. The main arguments offered by proponents of that option are that it is a simple and well-understood system that would enable water bills to be based on a more up-to-date assessment. However, there is no firm evidence that a system that relates charges to council tax bands is inherently or automatically related more closely to consumption or the ability to pay than a system based on rateable values. It depends on the way that the arrangement is structured.

Any change to charging arrangements would produce winners and losers—and, according to some models, the use of council tax could produce a large number of both. Again, it depends on the ratio between the bands.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: Yes, if the hon. Gentleman wishes to comment on this point.

Mr. Brake: Yes, I do. Is the Minister saying that he disowns the document entitled "Ending the Meter Mania", in which the then shadow Environment Secretary, the present Secretary of State for Health, suggested that council tax banding was quite a fair and simple way of administering water charges?

Mr. Meacher: I am not saying that. I have made it clear that the Government believe that it is essential that any proposals for a new charging regime provide adequate assurances regarding transitional arrangements. We do not want to see a large number of winners and losers—the winners would be very pleased, but we are concerned about the losers, particularly if they include those from the poorer groups. That would be a major disadvantage of the council tax band proposal. It depends on the structure and the ratio between the top and the lowest bands.

We are perfectly willing to consider the options and any proposals that are brought forward. Some ideas have already been suggested—indeed, I recently met representatives from a water company and a non-governmental organisation who are pushing the council tax band proposal strongly. We do not have a principled objection to the development of charges based on council tax bands so long as the proposals are refined to address the difficulties that I have mentioned.

Promoting increased customer choice means giving customers the option of a measured as well as an unmeasured charge. The use of water meters is not the only way of reducing water consumption. We need to ensure that water companies have programmes and targets for reducing leakage. I emphasise that that is an important part of our plan.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Meacher: I can see that I will not be able to make this speech until I allow the hon. Gentleman to intervene. Perhaps he would like to make his point.

Mr. Bottomley: I hope that the Minister will appreciate the point that I tried to make five minutes ago, where it would have fallen more naturally. Is it not a disgrace that an elderly single pensioner living in a bed-sitting room may at present be required to pay £185 a year, whereas the water company would say that, if she had a meter, the likely charge would be between £120 and £140 a year? During the Committee stage and before the Report stage of the Bill, will the Minister consider what sense of urgency he is willing to put into the legislation so that, perhaps by the end of 1999, every pensioner in those circumstances will have received an estimate from his or her water supplier of the gain to the pensioner if a water meter were installed during the next 12 months?

Mr. Meacher: I am pleased to say that I have good news for the hon. Gentleman. The Bill contains such proposals—Christmas has come early. We propose that customers should be able to opt for a meter to be installed free of charge by serving a measured charges notice on the water company. I know that that is not exactly what the hon. Gentleman suggested, but it comes to the same thing. If a pensioner wants a meter, he or she will find it easy to obtain one by serving a notice on the water company.

The Bill contains additional protection for customers. Some of those who serve a notice on the water company may be worried that, at the end of a year, they will be

worse off, and for that reason may not prepared to take the risk. They will be able to revoke the notice within the first year if they would prefer to revert to an unmeasured charge.

We are conscious of exactly the group to which the hon. Gentleman refers. We are making it extremely easy for them. The cost of a meter is £150 to £200. That will be provided free by the water company and, if it is not in their interest, customers will be able to revert to the previous system.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West) *rose—*

Mr. Meacher: This is probably the last intervention that I shall take.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the Minister. If metres are to be made available free of charge, and given that those who want a meter installed are generally those who will benefit from it, is it not inevitable that water charges for those who do not have meters will increase? Will that not be a pressing difficulty for those who do not fall into the poorest category and get relief, or do not benefit from a meter?

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman asks a fair question. The outcome depends on the rebalancing of the tariff basket. At present, about 14 per cent. of households have a meter. That figure is increasing at a rate of 2 to 3 per cent. a year, and we expect the rate to accelerate as a result of the Bill. If it became a flood, that would be a serious matter.

The cost of selective and optional metering under the Bill, as well as the metering that the water companies already intended, is estimated by Ofwat at £300 million in the period 2000 to 2005. That relatively small cost must be compared with the £8 billion to £8.5 billion that is the extent of the environmental quality investment programme that the water companies will be required to carry out. The hon. Gentleman's point is relevant, but the situation will be perfectly manageable.

Many of those who request a meter will be owner-occupiers, but there will also be tenants who could benefit from paying for water on a measured basis. That group is likely to include many of those among the least well-off, for whom any savings in costs would be particularly valuable. We estimate that as many as 54 per cent. of households in receipt of income benefit would gain from a switch to measured charges—not just the well-off, but a large proportion of the poorest would benefit.

It would not be right to discriminate between owner-occupiers and tenants. We therefore believe that tenants should have the same options as other customers to request the installation of a meter. For practical purposes, we propose to exclude that option for those with fixed-term tenancies of less than six months, because the customer would not be in residence long enough to benefit from the savings that may be made from having a meter.

We have prepared a regulatory appraisal to accompany our proposals, which makes it clear that the industry's compliance costs are low in relation to its turnover. I mentioned the £300 million figure, which includes the metering that companies are already programming in the absence of Government policy on this issue. That figure is taken into account in the director general's assessment that substantial price cuts can be afforded in 2000. The director general proposes cuts of as much as 15 to 20 per cent. after taking account of the increase in metering.

When customers move to a measured charge, other charges may have to be adjusted to take account of any shortfall or increase in the revenue to the water companies. The consequences for other charges will depend on the rate of switching, the characteristics of those for whom meters are installed and the manner in which costs are apportioned between different customers, which is a matter for water companies. Customers often opt for meters because their measured charges will be lower than their previous bills—tests show that it could be as much as 10 or 11 per cent.—which implies that they have been overpaying relative to their water use for some years. Putting their charges on a fairer basis inevitably has implications for the charges of other customers. We believe that the effect will be manageable within the annual changes in bills.

On delivery mechanisms, we propose that the Director General of Water Services should approve water companies' annual charges schemes. That formalises existing practice, under which the Office of Water Services is consulted by water companies on the preparation of their charges schemes. The Secretary of State will be able to give the director general guidance on the exercise of his power to approve charges schemes, and he will also be able to specify in regulations particular issues to be covered in charges schemes, such as social and environmental objectives—which remain a key part of our aims—and protection for vulnerable groups.

We do not propose that the use of such powers should conflict with the prime responsibility of the Director General of Water Services, which is economic regulation. The powers are deliberately circumscribed to ensure that they are not used to limit the total revenues of relevant undertakers. That will prevent the Secretary of State from making regulations that affect the overall price limits set by the director general following a periodic review. That is an important point, because it removes any risk that this mechanism could be used to create uncertainty about the effect of regulations on the companies' income.

Part I delivers our commitment to introducing a system that provides fair and affordable water charges, especially for vulnerable customers, while ensuring the sustainable use of water supplies and the protection of the aquatic environment. Part II contains provisions to improve the arrangements for regulating the water industry in Scotland.

The Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald), when he winds up the debate, will comment in more detail on the provisions in part II, but I shall briefly set the scene. The need for new arrangements was identified in last year's Scottish water industry review. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland announced the findings of that review to the House in December last year. As he explained, the review recognised a consensus that the existing arrangements for regulating the water industry in Scotland were not satisfactory. In particular, the current division between price regulation by the Scottish Water and Sewerage Customers Council and efficiency regulation by the Scottish Office had proved untenable.

[Mr. Meacher]

The review recommended that those functions should be united by the creation of a new professional regulator, responsible for all aspects of economic regulation and for promoting the customer interest. My right hon. Friend promised that the Government would legislate to improve the system of regulating water prices in Scotland, to strengthen the pressure for efficiency in the Scottish water industry, to create greater financial stability for the industry and to retain a strong, independent customer voice.

Those commitments are delivered in the Bill. It establishes a water industry commissioner for Scotland, who will operate independently of Scotland. It also establishes water industry consultative committees for each of the three water authorities in Scotland, which will constitute an independent source of advice for the commissioner in regard to customer interests.

The framework for advising Ministers on charges will include a number of changes from the current arrangements. For example, it will provide for the commissioner's advice to cover periods of several years. The matters that the commissioner is to take into account in framing his or her advice are specified. Perhaps most significant, the commissioner will be required to publish the original advice and any amendments made by Ministers, thus ensuring a transparent price-setting process.

This is a relatively small but, I think, important and valuable Bill, providing significant benefits for millions of people. It will protect vulnerable groups; it will prevent disconnections; it will extend consumer choice; and it will enhance conservation in the interests of the environment. I strongly commend it.

5.27 pm

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): The Minister for the Environment ended his speech by saying that his was a small Bill. In that regard I agree with him, but I also believe that it represents a missed opportunity for the Government.

Following the hyperbole of last year's water summit and the rhetoric of Ministers since, the Government have ducked some of the most important issues affecting both the industry and its customers. No part of the Bill deals with the issue of enhancing competition, which would benefit the industry and its customers alike. Nor does the Bill say much about improving the environmental impact of water use or, indeed, provide any strategic overview for the industry.

Instead of tackling those difficult but important issues, the Government have, in most instances, simply gone for the soft, populist options involving metering and disconnections—throwing in for good measure some rather nasty, neanderthal Labour-type powers for the Secretary of State and the regulator in clauses 4 and 5. That is probably rather appropriate. Even in this day and age, the Minister is renowned for being old Labour, so it is nice that a new-Labour Bill should still contain some old-Labour measures.

Sadly, though, the Government cannot resist ducking the important issues. Given the choice, they will always go for the soft options, in the hope that that will please their focus groups. I believe that, in time, they will regret their timidity in the Bill.

I appreciate the need for a water Bill at this time. The immediate urgency is plainly dictated by the need to extend the use of the old rateable-value system beyond 31 March 2000 as a basis for charging those without a meter, which is dealt with in clause 8. I do not object to that. The last Conservative Administration—apparently, the Minister is not aware of this—recognised that such a policy would have to be introduced, and the law amended, if we were returned to office after the general election.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough) *rose—*

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney) *rose—*

Mr. Burns: I will give way to the hon. Member for Waveney.

Mr. Blizzard: Why, then, was the original arrangement introduced in the Water Industry Act 1991? Does that not show that the then Government's real agenda was to impose water meters on the whole country, and that only the groundswell of public opinion knocked them off their course?

Mr. Burns: May I first point out that the 1991 Bill is a consolidation measure? The provision was in the original Water Act 1989, which brought privatisation. Secondly, the hon. Gentleman may not be aware, because he was not in the House at the time, that all the provisions emanated from the introduction of the community charge in 1988–89.

Helen Jackson *rose—*

Mr. Burns: Will the hon. Lady just contain herself for a minute?

It was expected that, in the ensuing 10 years, a system would be devised to cope with the problems that resulted from a rateable value that was based on valuations dating back to 1973. As everyone knows—it is now history—what happened was that the council tax replaced the community charge in the early 1990s and, rightly or wrongly, the previous Administration did not get around to working out—*[Laughter.]* It is a self-evident fact. Before the 1997 general election, they did not get around to addressing the problem, but for the Minister for the Environment, in a typical Millbank smear, to suggest that that meant that the previous Government were planning to force meters on to every household is patent nonsense.

Before the last election, we were on record as recognising that we would have to amend the law because we were not prepared, as a Government, to force water meters on to every household. That is why I have just said that we do not object to clause 8; it does something that we, too, would have done if we had been returned after the last general election.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Helen Jackson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burns: I give way to the hon. Lady because she has been asking more often.

Helen Jackson: I am grateful to the Minister—

Mr. Burns: Thank you.

Helen Jackson: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for setting the record straight that the privatisation of the

water industry was based on the same philosophy as the introduction of the poll tax. Why does he think that the former Secretary of State for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), who is not in the House today, and whom I asked many parliamentary questions on the very issue of water rates, did not once respond to any of those parliamentary questions and say that he recognised the need to extend the use of rateable value beyond 2000? Was it because he simply could not bring himself to recognise that the poll tax—and the philosophy that led to it—was such a total failure?

Mr. Burns: The straightforward answer to the last part of the hon. Lady's question is no. The answer to the first part—which I think the Minister would be reasonable enough to accept because he alluded to it—is that, to start with, after the introduction of the council tax, what we were going to do after 2000 was looked into. As the Minister is finding out and mentioned in his speech, it is highly complicated and difficult to ensure that it is a fair system. I will refer later to that aspect of the problem.

Given the electoral cycle, we then ran out of time and were unable to come up with a viable alternative. In the same way, the Government—this comment is not a criticism—have not so far been able to come up with an alternative, hence clause 8, although I know that they are consulting the industry to try to find out whether there is a viable alternative.

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burns: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am going to make some progress.

I should like to press the Minister on that issue because Conservative Members would like to know a little more about his thoughts. Possibly the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald), who is winding up the debate, could give us some answers on how and when he expects the rateable value system to be changed.

I understand that some water companies would like to transfer from the rateable value system to a link with the council tax banding system. As the Minister for the Environment mentioned, it is well known that the Government are not convinced of the merits of doing that because they fear that that would lead to a high-incidence effect, whereby customers on the lowest council tax—band A—would possibly, or almost certainly, pay more, and those at the top in band H would pay less.

Are the Government considering ways to deal with the problem within the council tax system, or will they entirely rule out using the council tax band system? If so, do Ministers have any thoughts on what system—it may be a totally new one—they might use if they do not use the rateable value system? I am sure that both Opposition Members and Government Members would be interested and grateful to hear the Minister's thoughts on the issue.

I accept that disconnection for non-payment of charges is a highly emotive subject. I should, therefore, like to put current practice into context before dealing with the proposals in detail.

Water companies currently have the power to disconnect customers who have not paid their bills. Under the Office of Water Services code of practice, in virtually all cases in which domestic customers have fallen into arrears, a water company will be able to disconnect only after it has obtained a court judgment in its favour. There is also a special provision in the licence that the supply of water to domestic premises should not be disconnected if the person liable for the charges informs the company that he or she is applying for help from the Department of Social Security or from local authority social services, and for as long as those bodies ask the company to delay disconnection.

If one compares that practice with that of other privatised companies supplying essential services—gas and electricity—one discovers that their legal requirements on disconnection are broadly similar, as they have a legal right to disconnect for non-payment. However, it is necessary for the other services to obtain a court order only if the customer does not consent to disconnection and utility staff need access to the premises to perform the disconnection.

As I said in an earlier intervention, it will undoubtedly come as the supreme irony to those opposed to water privatisation that, since water privatisation, water disconnections have fallen dramatically. Pre-privatisation, in 1988-89, there were 15,255 disconnections.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): I should like simply to clarify the point being made by the hon. Gentleman, who is talking about officially recorded disconnections. If disconnections forming part of the court case on budget payment units involving Birmingham city council and other local authorities were added to the figures, surely he would accept that a disguised and substantial number of disconnections are being hidden in that very process.

Mr. Burns: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: I am talking about official disconnection figures, and not the figures as they may apply to budget payment units.

In 1997–98, the most recent full year, there were 1,807 disconnections. As the Minister said in his speech, in the first six months of this year, there were 640 disconnections.

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): I hope that my hon. Friend will point out also to the Government that—in addition to the Ofwat recommendations, which are very closely adhered to—regional customer service commissions are brought in to investigate each and every threat of domestic disconnection, to ensure that those who are in vulnerable circumstances are not involved. Therefore, those who are cut off are not the "can't pays" but the "won't pays".

Mr. Burns: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, who—with her customary perspicacity—has anticipated a matter that I shall deal with a little later in my speech.

As I said, in the last full year—1997–98—there were 1,807 disconnections and, as the Minister said, there were 640 disconnections in the first six months of 1998. It should be noted that two—not nine, as I think the Minister said at the beginning of his speech—of the 27 water companies currently operate a non-cut-off policy. Nine have carried out no disconnections this year, which is not quite the same as a deliberate no-cut-off policy, although I fully accept that the result is the same.

Mr. Gray: My hon. Friend will have noticed that, in an earlier intervention, the Minister apparently was not

[Mr. Gray]

aware of how many of the 640 disconnections were domestic, of empty houses or of hospitals and schools. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Bill relates to the method of charging after 2000, and that the little bit about disconnection is not to save any unfortunate people who find themselves in such a position, but is about political correctness? It is about soundbites and headlines, and not about realities at all.

Mr. Burns: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend. In many ways he has hit the nail on the head with a hammer.

In my region, Anglian Water—

Mr. Meacher: In view of what the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray) has said, may I give the disconnection figures to the House? They show that he was not quite right. There were none for schools, none for hospitals—

Mr. Burns: Surprise, surprise.

Mr. Meacher: Exactly, but that is the point that the hon. Member for North Wiltshire made.

There were about 20 disconnections of empty properties, and 47 per cent. of disconnections were for under 48 hours. In other words, 53 per cent. of disconnections were for more than 48 hours, and more than a third were for more than 28 days. Think what being disconnected for more than four weeks means.

Mr. Burns: I am pleased to have given the Minister the opportunity to put those figures before the House and on the record.

In my region, Anglian Water's disconnections have fallen from 978 five years ago to 56 last year. This year it has disconnected only 16 households in an area with 2.4 million properties. To give another example, North West Water—

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burns: Would the hon. Lady please wait?

Last year, North West Water disconnected 93 homes out of 2.6 million. Those figures simply put into context the current situation compared with that 10 or 15 years ago, when disconnections were a far more significant and serious problem. I in no way underestimate the problems facing people who are disconnected.

Mr. Burden *rose—*

Dr. Starkey *rose—*

Mr. Burns: I should like to make a little more progress.

Those figures show that the water companies are reluctant to cut people's water off. As my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) said, they prefer to work with individuals who are in difficulty and use their legal powers only as a last resort. I believe, and I hope that the House would agree, that that approach is responsible and realistic.

In some ways, the Government's disconnection proposals are a quick-fix, populist measure. Although disconnection of domestic supply will be illegal, the water companies will, as the Minister rightly said, still be able to use the civil courts to pursue non-payers who persistently refuse help and do not pay. In effect, although the water companies will not be able to disconnect, they will still be able to use the courts to retrieve money owed to them. It may be argued—*[Interruption.]* I am glad that the Minister agrees. I am trying to be reasonable and realistic.

Given that a majority of disconnections—or, in the light of the figures for the first six months of this year and those that the Minister has just given to the House, a large minority of disconnections—were restored within 48 hours, it could be argued that the threat of an individual losing personal belongings such as compact discs, televisions or videos for non-payment would be a greater incentive to pay than disconnection. Some people may not agree, but I believe that if an individual is given the choice between having his water cut off for up to 48 hours and losing some of his belongings to the bailiffs—and not getting them back—the latter will be a great incentive to pay the bill.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Burns: I find this extraordinary. I am slightly uncomfortable when Labour Members agree with me, but when one is talking common sense, it should not come as a great surprise.

Mr. Burden: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burns: No, please do not spoil it.

Similarly, I am not convinced by the argument made by some that, with the withdrawal of the power of disconnection, the cost of recovering money from customers will significantly increase bad debt and costs to the water companies. My scepticism of that argument is twofold. First, the threat of the bailiffs is a powerful disincentive to the "won't pay" brigade. Secondly, at present, water companies have to go to court for an order to disconnect, which involves costs for them. As the Minister said, when the companies apply for a court order for an attachment of earnings or to send in the bailiffs, they will have the right to pass on the legal costs to those whom they are taking to court. Getting an order to send in the bailiffs is a direct reflection of present practice, except that it will be to recover costs or for an attachment of earnings rather than to disconnect the supply.

I have some questions for the Minister on the issue. Have the Government carried out a full and, as far as possible, accurate business impact assessment of the effects of the clause on the water companies? Have the Government estimated whether there will be a noticeable increase in the number of "won't pays", or do they share my analysis that, after possible initial problems caused by a new system, there will not be a noticeable change? If the Minister has any figures or assessments, I should appreciate it if he could let us see them.

Why does clause 1(1) and (2) seemingly—I am choosing my words carefully—apply only to domestic properties that are main homes rather than second residences, hospitals and schools? What is the rationale for limiting the provision to such premises? Are not

private residential and nursing homes equally important—or universities, colleges of higher education, children's homes or companies that supply medical needs to hospitals or to the country? The list could be endless. I am puzzled about why hospitals and schools have been singled out. No one would argue that a residential nursing home or a children's home was less important than a hospital or a school.

Mr. Leigh: Does my hon. Friend agree that there is a problem with sending in the bailiffs, because it may be difficult to prove ownership? Although rarely used, disconnection is a useful threat. Does my hon. Friend believe that the number who do not pay their bills will increase? The measure may be considered populist, but it may be less popular among those on low incomes who pay their bills.

Mr. Burns: Some people from the "won't pay" brigade will do all that they can to avoid having their personal belongings taken by bailiffs. However, that is not the only weapon in the armoury. Water companies can go to court to seek an attachment of earnings or of benefits such as income support, as well as using the other measures that the Minister mentioned. I suspect—although it will be difficult to prove until we have firm evidence of it—that initially, there may well be an increase in people seeking to avoid paying because the penalties appear lighter, but when the system starts working and people are faced with bailiffs or attachments of earnings, they will realise that they risk losing their videos and compact disc players, and that will be a powerful incentive. Personally, I would rather have my water cut off for 48 hours than lose my television and video and never get them back.

On my hon. Friend's final point, I agree that the Government think that they are introducing a populist measure, but when people face attachments of earnings and risk losing their property, it will not be popular, and that supports the argument that it will be an incentive for people to pay their bills.

Mr. Burden: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is making a powerful case for the provisions that relate to disconnection. If I understand him rightly, he is saying that he agrees that "can't pays" should not be disconnected. What is the Opposition's view on so-called budget payment units, pre-payment meters and trickle valves, as water companies have been rather ambiguous about whether they relate to "can't pays" or "won't pays"? The Government have made it quite clear that they are suspicious that trickle valves are a way in which to avoid disconnection. Do the Opposition agree? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Burns: I am not going to duck that point, so there is no point in Labour Members laughing and making a big deal of it. I shall turn to help for vulnerable groups later in my speech. On trickle valves, if disconnections are to be banned by law, by definition trickle valves should also be banned and the Bill does that.

The hon. Gentleman may have slightly missed the thrust of my speech. I am saying not that I agree positively with what the Government are doing, but that they are legislating for what already happens in respect of the vast majority of water users. When the Bill becomes law, instead of using the courts to disconnect, water companies will have the power to use the courts to recover their money through other means.

I should now like to turn to the clauses dealing with water metering. Again, it appears that the Government are being pushed along on a populist wave and are putting into law the practice that the majority of water companies already operate voluntarily. Rightly in my view, the Government have said no to compulsory metering for all, but are legislating to make water companies install meters on request free of charge and with the option to go back to the rateable value basis of payment within 12 months if the customer does not like the meter system or, more crucially, does not like the water bills.

On environmental grounds, water meters are very environmentally friendly, especially in areas of sparse supply. To many customers, especially the elderly, single people living alone or families without children, they are probably financially friendly too. As the Minister said, only approximately 14 per cent. of households have meters and I believe that a significant proportion of them live in houses built since 1990-91. It is self-evident that the more households there are with meters, the more it helps environmentally. Thus there is an incentive for water companies to encourage and persuade people to switch to meters because rateable value customers have no incentive to be water efficient. That is exactly what many companies are doing.

Of the 27 water companies in England and Wales, 15 supply free water meters, including five of the nine largest companies. Charges for the other companies range from an average cost—so that nobody starts throwing around other figures, it should be understood that the Minister tended to use maximum costs—of £14 in an existing chamber to £60 within the boundary. A number of companies allow households to revert to the rateable value system if they do not like their meters.

Last year, Anglian Water conducted a metering exercise in Bury St. Edmunds. Meters were installed in about 12,000 homes and customers were invited to choose between continuing to pay their bills based on rateable values or paying metered charges; 52 per cent. of customers voluntarily elected to pay metered charges. At the end of the 12-month period, 5 per cent. switched back to rateable value bills. The House will agree that that is a very small proportion of the total numbers.

There is a line of argument that the provisions will cost water companies dearly. I am not totally convinced, because the majority of water companies already operate a similar policy. There are also those who say that rateable value customers will be subsidised by meter customers or that prices will be higher than they otherwise would be if everyone were metered. However, even if that is true, the system exists today, so the Bill will not alter the position significantly—or certainly not before the Government reach a strategic view on the future of rateable value billing systems, if they ever come up with a system that they find acceptable.

There are, however, a number of questions that need to be answered on this part of the Bill and I would appreciate answers, if not today, when we discuss the fine print in Committee.

The Minister mentioned the business impact assessment that has been conducted on this part of the Bill. First, I would be grateful if Ministers could let us have precise figures—not those relating to the impact of the Bill plus the existing practices of water companies, but in respect of the impact of the Bill alone. Secondly, what research,

[Mr. Burns]

if any have the Government carried out on the environmental implications of clause 6, especially in areas of water scarcity? Thirdly, if a household installs a meter and then moves to another home after 12 months, will the new owner have the option of reverting to the rateable value system or does the law take the view, "Caveat emptor. You buy the house knowing what comes with it so you are stuffed."

Mr. Meacher *indicated assent.*

Mr. Burns: I see the Minister kindly nodding in assent, so I take it that a household moving into a house after 12 months have elapsed since the installation of a meter will have no option to go back to the rateable value system. I find it helpful that he has clarified that point.

Finally, let me turn to clauses 4 and 5 which deal with the making and approval of charges schemes and the Secretary of State's regulatory powers. To be quite frank, they are very nasty powers—a throwback to the days of Government intervention in the marketplace. They show that, underneath new Labour, the Government still hanker after the interfering, nannying powers that they so enjoyed using in the past. It is self-evident that any decent person wants to provide help to those who need special protection, but help does not have to be provided through the political interference of a Secretary of State. Currently, water companies make special provision for vulnerable customer groups.

North West Water, for example, has an extra care services scheme to help elderly customers, customers with a disability or a serious illness and those with sight or hearing difficulties. The help includes steps to ensure that customers receive a constant supply of water. The company employs two counsellors to visit customers at home to offer them help and advice when they get into difficulties, a scheme similar to the one that my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay mentioned.

Anglian Water, which covers my area, has a number of innovative schemes, including SoLow, which helps elderly customers—whom the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) mentioned—or those on benefit by removing the standing charge and charging a slightly higher rate per cubic metre. Its Plus 4 scheme assists the larger low-income families who use more than average amounts of water by raising the standing charge but cutting the volume rate. Giving the Secretary of State extra powers to interfere will stifle the incentive for water companies to employ an innovative tariff strategy.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Burns: I will give way to the hon. Lady who, although she does not know it, has cost me dearly this evening. I hope that my giving way to her will not cost me more.

Dr. Starkey: I am intensely flattered by the hon. Gentleman's comments on my effectiveness. In answer to my earlier intervention, my right hon. Friend the Minister pointed out that his intention was not to stifle innovation by water companies, but to ensure that the worst companies lived up to the standards that the best companies have adopted voluntarily.

Mr. Burns: I, too, heard the Minister's reply, but I will believe it when I see it. With his honeyed words, he no doubt believes himself to be a reasonable and decent human being, but he will not always be the Minister for the Environment. A different Minister in a different climate, with a different attitude to the water companies, will also have powers under clauses 4 and 5 to do almost anything. That is a throwback to the interfering, nannying and regulatory approach of previous Labour Governments. Putting such powers on the statute book will provide a dangerous precedent.

Mr. Meacher: The hon. Gentleman must not spoil his speech, which has been very welcome; he has endorsed much of what the Bill does and I am grateful for his understanding. On this point, however, he is wrong. The clauses are drafted in such a way as to circumscribe the powers so that there can be no question of interfering with the proper economic regulation that is laid down by the Director General of Water Services; there will be no threat to the water companies' revenue base. The hon. Gentleman is wrong to suggest that the clauses contain a new, wide-ranging power which will threaten the water companies; they merely formalise what is already in place in the guidance to the director general.

Mr. Burns: Obviously, we can return to that in Committee. My point is that the Government are laying themselves open to the charge of social engineering by deciding who should be assisted and by imposing that decision on the water companies; they could shift to the water companies their responsibility to assist vulnerable groups through the benefits system.

The Minister will not want to admit that on the Floor of the House, and we will be able in the not-too-distant future to discuss the matter in greater detail in Committee, but I am firmly of the view—it has not been altered by anything that the Minister has said—that clauses 4 and 5 are a blunt instrument, which will probably fail to take into account wide regional variations in the problems and circumstances that face water companies and water supply.

As the Minister knows, different water companies charge different prices for water and sewerage, but the proportion of income support to help to pay water bills is constant across the country. In July last year, he told the Environment Sub-Committee that he would not press for that proportion to be variable. Perhaps he will now reconsider the matter; I express no opinion on it except to say that, logically, the system should be brought into line with the system that applies to housing and council tax benefit, which is variable down to individual rent and council tax.

No one would disagree with the gist of the right hon. Gentleman's words—that water is an essential to life. Given that that is so, however, surely there should be a variable element in the benefits system to help the less well-off to pay their water bills, just as there is a variable element for housing and council tax benefit. It was illogical for him to reject that out of hand when he spoke to the Environment Sub-Committee. I suspect that he agrees with the logic of my argument, but he knows that his views would not, because of their cost implications, be approved by the Treasury in a month of Sundays.

Conservative Members are concerned about the wide-ranging powers that clause 5 invests in the Secretary of State. In Committee, we shall look very carefully at the

clause and at a number of issues that arise from the provisions on disconnecting, metering and Scotland. Because much of the Bill enshrines in legislation what most water companies are already doing in practice, I shall not ask my hon. Friends to vote against its Second Reading. However, we will carefully consider its provisions in Committee before it returns to the Floor of the House on Report and on Third Reading.

6.7 pm

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): The Tories' failure to understand the basic proposition with which my right hon. Friend the Minister began his speech—that water is an essential public service—was why when, before the general election, one mentioned the water industry and fat cats, most electors were halfway to putting their cross by a Labour candidate's name. Their misunderstanding of what a public service such as the water industry meant was a significant factor in their whole-hearted rejection by the country.

On 11 May 1993, I introduced a ten-minute Bill—the Water (Domestic Disconnections) Bill. I did so because, on 28 April, I had received a parliamentary answer that contradicted what the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) has said; it spelt out how, in the year following privatisation, domestic disconnections rose threefold, from 7,000 to 21,000. Nobody at the time said, "This is appalling"—the Conservative Government certainly showed no signs of being worried. In the same year, there was an equally disturbing increase in the number of cases of dysentery, especially in large conurbations such as Birmingham. Public health authorities and environmental health officers were concerned about the public health dangers of leaving a household without running water, and I pay tribute to the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, and officers such as Howard Price, for devising a Bill that would have outlawed domestic disconnections.

The Bill was supported by hon. Members on both sides of the House. The former Member for Batley and Spen—a Conservative—many other hon. Members and I all made the point that, if housing legislation provided that a house without running water was not fit for human habitation on public health grounds, we should have no part as a Parliament in allowing private water companies to deprive homes of running water. That would, in itself, create a public health risk. That is the view of the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing and anybody involved in public health in this country.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Nobody in the House would disagree with the hon. Lady about public health, and no one would wish to see any truly vulnerable person cut off. However, we must be careful not to distort the picture. The hon. Lady chose the figure of about 20,000 disconnections in the first year after privatisation, but she well knows that, in the previous year—when water companies were in the public sphere—there were about 15,000 disconnections. If the hon. Lady thinks that privatisation is such a bad thing, can she explain why that figure of 20,000 disconnections—which I accept—has fallen to such a point that, between April and September this year, there were 640 disconnections, two thirds of which were followed by reconnection within 48 hours?

Helen Jackson: I was expressing concern about disconnections, not privatisation, and I am glad that the hon. Gentleman believes that everybody in the House should agree with me. I hope that that is partly why every hon. Member will support the Bill in the House tonight. The numbers have fallen from that appalling figure of 21,000 is not only because of the public concern generated at the time, but because—in response to that concern—many water companies started to introduce pay-as-you-go systems, resulting in the budget payment meters with trickle-valve systems which, in the end, had the same effect. The hon. Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) looks puzzled, but such systems do leave domestic properties without water.

To their credit, local authorities—particularly those in large urban communities—and public health institutions became extremely concerned that the accelerated introduction of budget payment units, particularly in Birmingham and the north-west, created a serious public health risk. Those authorities challenged the scheme and, with the help of my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden)—who had a subsequent Adjournment debate on the subject—they mounted a significant campaign to raise those concerns. The official disconnection rate started to fall because so many companies introduced budget payment units.

If all hon. Members agree that we should not leave a house without access to running water, they will fully support clauses 1 and 2 of the Bill, which the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) spent so long saying were not good.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): A number of people use pre-payment budget meters as a way of budgeting and want to continue with that. What would my hon. Friend say to them?

Helen Jackson: That is a very good point. My right hon. Friend the Minister made it clear that one of the purposes of the Bill as regards charging systems is to encourage water companies to enter into many flexible arrangements to make it easy for their customers of restricted means to pay for their water. Any budget payment system by which households can pay more easily is to be welcomed. However, we should not welcome the hidden cut-off within those systems which could leave households without water.

The fact that the Conservatives are still exercised by this issue exposes the flaws in their philosophy, which dates back to the time of privatisation. At that time, everything that we received as a public service had to be part of the market and had to be seen as a commodity—whether it was the sun, the rain or the air—and putting obviously public commodities into the hands of private companies somehow gave those companies the green light to maximise their profits by profiteering.

All of us in the Chamber tonight should be thankful for the early action of this Government in ensuring, through the windfall tax, that those moneys obtained by profiteering will now, instead of going into the pockets of the privatised water companies, create jobs and training through the new deal. Without the change of Government,

[Helen Jackson]

that shift of thinking would not have happened, and we would still have a Government with a knee-jerk response who would say that any privatised utility was bound to be wholly good and that any suggestion otherwise was bound to be wrong.

That exposes the Tory philosophy on these matters, but it also exposes the failure of the previous Government fully to understand the structure of the water industry's costings. When we pay our water bills, we are paying not simply for the water that comes out of the tap, but for the management of the whole water environment. We are paying for the way in which reservoirs are managed, for leisure activities on them, for the wetlands, for waste water management, for sewerage and for the treatment of drinking water. The last accounts for less than 50 per cent. of the costs of the industry. The volumetric element—how much goes through the taps—accounts for one quarter of the rest of the fixed costs of supplying drinking water.

The assumption that payment must be on the volume of water that an individual uses in the home bears no relation to the actual cost structure of the industry. Inevitably, therefore, problems are built into that assumption—which brings me to the second element of the Bill: the section on charging systems.

I welcome the end of compulsory metering, and the introduction of much more flexibility and choice in the way in which companies and customers can approach the water charging system. As part of that, it was clearly necessary to extend the option of using rateable values beyond 2000. It is important to recognise that the chief argument against universal metering—it is supported by most water companies—is that it is very expensive. On top of the capital expense of introduction, there is the year-on-year cost of an individual bill based on a volumetric amount, measured by a device that has a limited life, is bound to go wrong, will need maintenance and checking and is open to contradiction. A fixed charge based on a property does not change a great deal from year to year and overhead costs are significantly lower, as most water companies generally recognise.

Both the British Medical Association and the Royal College of Nursing would view universal metering as worrying on health grounds. I am concerned about the pensioners on low incomes who worry about the cost of water every time they boil a kettle for a cup of tea. That is not an effective way of ensuring public health.

The households that gain from a switch from an unmeasured to a measured charge are those that pay at the top rate, and the extra costs will have to be borne by others.

Mr. Woodward: I share some of the hon. Lady's reservations about metering, but who does she think will pick up the tab when people move from a fixed charge to metering?

Helen Jackson: The water companies will pick up the tab, as they have the job of managing the system as efficiently as possible. A huge part of their responsibility involves introducing an equitable method of charging. I warmly welcome the Minister's proposals to encourage water companies to come up with schemes that make the charges fair, but I am seeking clarification because the choice in the Bill appears to be rather one way.

People can move, at no charge, from unmeasured to metered charges, but I would like domestic customers also to have the choice to move to a notional rateable value if their houses are built after 1990, or to some other form of unmeasured charge. I hope that the companies will take that possibility seriously, as it would reduce their overheads, and there would be a two-way choice. I am sure that Ministers will take up those points in Committee.

In conclusion, I welcome the introduction of flexibility in charging systems, but I believe that customers should have a two-way choice; mostly, I welcome the recognition, running right through the Bill, that the management of our total water resource is too important to be left to the whims and profiteering of private markets.

The public interest in sewerage and water must come first, for public health reasons and because, quite apart from us, the whole ecosystem of this country depends on good management of the water environment. We have to get that management right. The water companies have that duty, under a regulatory system and a responsible Government. The Bill takes us a long way down that road, with Government recognising their responsibilities for the first time in many years. It has taken a Labour Government to do that.

6.26 pm

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I want to talk about disconnection, which is covered in clauses 1 and 2; responsibility for domestic supply pipes, which is not in the Bill and should be; and sewerage, which, despite the fact that it is mentioned in the long title, is not referred to specifically in any of the clauses. I intend to quote from a letter sent to me by the Director General of Water Services, Ian Byatt, on 20 November; from the briefing paper from Ofwat's southern customer service committee, which has been sent to all southern Members; and from the Ofwat National Customer Council briefing paper, which I believe has been sent to all Members of Parliament.

I represent a constituency in which more than 30 per cent. of the population—double the national average—are over retirement age. In some areas of the constituency, the figure is as high as 60 per cent. I think that I can reasonably claim, after 15 years in the House, to have listened to many pleas for assistance from many elderly people, and to have a reasonably detailed knowledge of their circumstances and requirements. I take no pleasure in saying that I also represent the area of the south-east of England—the Isle of Thanet—with the highest level of deprivation by all social factors.

I am sure that several of my constituents have had their supplies disconnected in the past three or four years, but, despite the fact that, like most Members of Parliament, I hold a regular surgery and receive a vast amount of correspondence, I have not received a single letter in that time about unfair disconnection, or simply about disconnection. That suggests that, if any of my constituents' supplies have been disconnected, it has been for good reason. I have certainly not received any representation on the matter from an elderly person, but, over many years in the House, I have received many letters from elderly people complaining bitterly that they are paying and carrying the can—and the burden of debt—for people who do not pay their way.

The overwhelming majority of our citizens living on modest retirement incomes have been used, over many years of privation and hardship—including throughout the

war—to paying their way. They pay their bills first, before spending money on beer, cigarettes, satellite television or any other luxury, and they take a pride in doing so. They do not know any other way, and they resent the fact that there are other people who simply want a free ride. That is a subject on which I receive letters.

Clause 1 will actively encourage the non-payers not to pay. Disconnection was mentioned by the Minister, by my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) and by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson). I concur entirely with the view that water is one of the essentials of life, that any modern household requires a supply of clean water and that, on health grounds, the removal of that supply is highly undesirable; but adducing the law relating to habitable properties is unrealistic. When we talk about habitable properties, we mean that a proper supply is not available in those properties: we are not talking about a short-term disconnection. Even the Minister will agree that the disconnections to which he and others referred have been short-term ones.

Helen Jackson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Gale: I shall give way to the hon. Lady in a moment.

I do not know anybody who believes that a supply of clean water is not desirable, but I am worried that the Government's approach will encourage non-payers. Worse, it will create circumstances—as my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford said—in which the water companies, instead of going to court and applying for a disconnection order which would last for a short time in almost every case, will seek permission to attach income or benefit, or to send the bailiffs in to seize property.

I can foresee circumstances in which the Minister will come under pressure in the House from hon. Members. They will say that one of their constituents is a tenant, and his landlord, who uses the address of the flat, has not paid the bill. The tenant, who pays a rent that embraces the water bill as part of the deal on a furnished property and knows nothing of the circumstances of the non-payment, suddenly finds the bailiffs at the door ready to seize his goods. What provision is the Minister making to ensure that that does not happen? We may face that problem in a few months if he does nothing.

The Minister has not come to grips with the advantages for domestic budgeting of pre-payment meters for those who have difficulty in paying water bills, although the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East (Mr. White) touched on the issue when he intervened in the speech by the hon. Member for Hillsborough.

The principle behind pre-payment meters is accepted for the electricity supply. The electricity companies use such meters sensibly, cautiously and intelligently, in cases in which customers are known to have a history of non-payment or a difficulty in budgeting and paying, as some people do. The Bill will prevent that from happening in the supply of water.

The hon. Member for Hillsborough agreed with the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, North-East, and said that it was an imaginative idea, but the Bill would prevent it. I believe that it would be sensible to go a stage further, and provide the pre-payment meter with a built-in cut-off point, as has happened in the past. They should give a warning signal followed by several days of supply, so that the customer knows that the money has run out, followed by—if necessary—disconnection. All the customer has to do is go down to the office, get the key recharged, and reconnect the supply. That involves no difficulty, and no legal intervention.

I raised the issue in my letter to the director general, and his reply, in a letter dated 20 November 1998, read:

"The Government intends to ban disconnections, and the High Court has ruled that budget payment units are not lawful operated as they were with a disconnection facility. While I agree with you that disconnection is an effective last resort (and it must be used carefully with proper procedural safeguards)"—

I agree—

"regulators must work within the law."

The Bill should address that problem. The water companies believed that such meters were a useful tool, and so did the director general of Ofwat. They have to work within the law, but we are in the process tonight of changing the law, and I cannot understand why the Minister will not permit it to be changed in that way.

Mr. Burden: The hon. Gentleman must be aware that there are many easy-payment aids to budgeting that do not involve disconnection. He believes that "can't pays" should not be disconnected, and that pre-payment meters should be allowed to have automatic disconnection facilities after a warning, but how does the unit know whether it is dealing with a "won't pay" a "can't budget" or a "can't pay" before it cuts the customer off?

Mr. Gale: The answer is that it does not know, in the same way that an electricity meter does not know, but I doubt that any Labour Member would say that pre-payment electricity meters are unfair. If the customer runs out of money, the house goes dark.

It is all very well saying the electricity supply is different from the water supply, but it could cause problems if elderly people's electricity were cut off on a night such as last night, and they have no fire. However, I have received no complaints about such a circumstance. Other hon. Members may have done so, and they may pray those cases in aid. I have not done so, and, I repeat, I represent a constituency with a high elderly population, whose interests I take a pride in seeking to represent.

I do not believe that the Bill is the right way forward, and nor does the Ofwat National Customer Council. I propose to place sections of its briefing paper—all hon. Members have received a copy—on the record. In its advice in the section on debt recovery and disconnection, the council states:

"The Government wants water companies to rely exclusively on civil debt recovery procedures available through the courts. We believe that this may prove less effective and no less unpalatable than disconnection—in particular the use of civil debt recovery procedures will add to the customer's debt."

That may cause the problem that I mentioned earlier when bailiffs go in and seek to seize property belonging to someone who is not the householder.

The briefing paper continues:

[Mr. Gale]

"The level of customer debt in the water industry will rise as more customers refuse to pay; the costs of debt recovery and unpaid water charges will be borne by other customers."

I emphasise that those are not my words, but those of the Ofwat National Customer Council. Once again, the payer will be asked to pay for the non-payer.

The briefing paper also states:

"The DSS Direct Payments Scheme enables money to be passed directly from customers' benefit payments to water companies to help them budget to pay their water bills and avoid disconnection for non-payment of charges.

The Government has confirmed that the scheme will continue to operate when household disconnection is prohibited but has not said precisely how; more detailed assurances are required."

That is another flaw in the Bill, and the Government should pay much more attention to the section of the Bill referring to that issue.

I turn now to the issue of responsibility for domestic supply. The Bill is an excellent opportunity to address another problem of particular concern to my elderly constituents, and, I suspect, to those of other hon. Members. The Bill will give people the right to have a water meter installed. Elderly people will be led to believe that they will save money by doing so, because they are low users.

What will happen when the water company comes along to install a meter, and discovers—as is often the case in elderly properties that are not as well maintained as they should be, because the owner cannot afford it—that the pipe from the meter to the house is rotten and leaking? That is a real problem, because the pipe is the responsibility of the householder. Such householders are often elderly and on limited incomes, but the water company has a right to say, "We must renew that pipe, because it is leaking. The director general of Ofwat and the Government have told us that we must repair leaks. We are going to repair the pipe between the new meter and your stopcock, and we are going to charge you for it, because it is your responsibility."

The cost will depend on the length of the pipe involved and on what has to be dug up. The pipe may go under a conservatory or patio that someone installed without knowing that the pipe ran under it. The cost could be a minimum of £500, and, if it is a case of taking up a patio or conservatory floor, it could be £1,500 or £2,000. That enormous bill will suddenly land on the doormat of an elderly person who the day before had a water supply and no problems.

The Bill is an opportunity to deal with that problem once and for all. It is an opportunity to say—there is an element of rough justice in this, I concede—that the water company has a statutory duty to lay the pipe to the stopcock in the house if it requires repair.

That will mean two things. The company will incur a cost, which it will have to transfer, as it will not bear it alone, so everyone will pay a little more. Labour Members may say that that sounds like rank socialism—[*Laughter.*] In that case, they should support me, and help me to move an amendment to the Bill. In this instance, I would sooner everyone paid a pound or two more a year as an insurance policy. One day we will all benefit. I would sooner that happened than that some of my elderly constituents—plucked out non-selectively because they happen to have applied for a water meter—found a bill for between £500 and £2,000 on their mat. I very much hope that the Minister for the Environment will take that matter on board.

I raised that matter with Ian Byatt, who told me:

"Making water companies responsible for the customers' supply pipes would involve changing the law and is obviously a matter for Parliament."

We are Parliament, so let us change it. Let us do my elderly constituents and those in other constituencies some good.

Finally, the long title of the Bill mentions sewerage, but there is no mention of it in the Bill itself. I pay the Minister the warmest compliment that I can. On the very day of the summer recess, if I remember rightly, he courteously and quickly received me and a delegation of my constituents to discuss Foreness Point sewerage provision, for which I am deeply grateful, as are my constituents. Therefore, he is aware of the problem that I face in my constituency, but it is a broader problem.

In north Thanet, Southern Water wants to extend a sewage treatment plant. To do so, it requires the right to acquire land and dig up a site of special scientific interest and of natural beauty. We are told that the site will be reinstated when the job is done, in four or five, or perhaps even six or seven, years. In the meantime, my constituents will be subjected to considerable disturbance. However, when the job is done, we will still be pumping sewage into the sea, and, in this day and age, that is not acceptable.

The Bill does not deal with that problem, but makes it harder for the water companies to deal with it, which I find incomprehensible. I cannot understand why we and Ofwat are saying that the water companies have been efficient and have made large profits, so we should take those back and share them out among the customers. I want that money to be put into better services, so that we have fewer leaking pipes. Above all, I want it to go into modern, 21st-century treatment plants, which will satisfy the needs of our children and grandchildren.

If we are to bequeath a legacy through the Bill, surely it must be that it is incomprehensible that we should dig up fine land and, despite having a water shortage, pump sewage into the sea, rather than properly treating and recycling the usable effluent by putting it into rivers, allowing it to become diluted, and abstracting it lower down. However, neither I nor the Minister can tell Southern Water that we require it to install and pay for—at considerably greater expense—an inland treatment plant, if we are saying in the next breath that we will take away the money that the company could use to do it.

Kent is short of water. Tourism and light industries are developing, and, increasingly, Kent is becoming a dormitory for London, so it will need more water. Southern Water and Mid Kent Water will have to build a reservoir at Broad Oak or raise the banks at Bewl water to provide it. Where will they get the money to do so, if the House—through the regulator and legislation—denies them the means and resources?

The balance of the Bill is wrong. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford said from the Conservative Front Bench, we will not oppose Second Reading, but we shall try to amend the Bill in Committee and on Report, and we will oppose it on Third Reading if we do not secure the undertakings, assurances and, in some cases, the improvements it needs.

6.46 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in this debate. First, I must congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on the Bill. He has always been a champion of social justice; in the Bill, he clearly demonstrates that he is trying to eliminate injustice for consumers, and I congratulate him. Certainly, all Labour Members would agree with him.

The main thrust of the Bill is to lift the spectre of disconnection for ever. I would argue that the Government need to build on the period of stability that the Bill will provide for the water industry to consult on a truly lasting scheme for water charging, which incorporates environmental, social and investment needs.

Having listened to the debate, I think that we all agree that water is a basic requirement of human life. It is worth reminding the House that the basic need for a hygienic water supply and the need to combat illness and disease led to the setting up of local forms of government and administration. Since then, an unimpeded supply of water has become something that most people take for granted.

The affordability of water is a key issue, as is the need to ensure that no one is denied access to a water supply, whatever his or her needs. Some people have more needs than others. Large families, often headed by a single parent, obviously need more water for washing, bathing and cooking than small families. I take the point that, often, the largest users of water are affluent families who have—or feel that they have—large cars to wash and lawns to water, but we must not lose sight of the needs of the poorest among us. The key issue is the need to eliminate—

Mr. Woodward: By how much will the cost of supplying water to homes increase as a result of the cost of installing a large number of water meters? What about the effects of moving from charges based on rateable values to meters? If the final cost is more expensive water, will not those vulnerable people—not necessarily the people who would be cut off, but those at the bottom of the pile—have to pay larger bills?

Dr. Kumar: If the hon. Gentleman is patient, I will come to that point.

The key issue is the need to eliminate the spectre of disconnection. My area is served by Northumbrian Water and the number of disconnections there hardly registers—indeed, there have been none this year, despite the poverty and high unemployment from which many of the region's towns, cities and villages suffer. The arrangements that are in hand in our region are certainly a model for the rest of the country to follow and they comprise the following: the operation of a well-resourced customer services committee; proper collaborative arrangements with local councils and housing associations, which were mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson); and on-going liaison with bodies such as consumer advice centres and citizens advice bureaux.

We recognise that some disconnections occur. Sometimes they are the result of "don't pays" rather than "can't pays", but even in the former case the actions of, say, obstructive husbands can blight the lives, and harm the health of, wives and children. Despite everything, some "can't pays" slip through the net. My experience as a councillor, and my constituency case load, has taught me that people who are less able to communicate are prone to pulling the blanket over their heads and hoping that problems will go away; of course, they do not.

I appreciate the fear of water companies that merely removing the ability to disconnect will not solve their problem of recovering their costs and charges. The right to an uninterrupted supply of water comes with the responsibility of bearing a share of the cost of having it delivered through the tap. The Government should rule out some ideas now, such as devices that restrict the flow and amount of water delivered. That idea was floated by some water companies in the south of England.

I would like the Government to rule out pre-pay meters, which merely give rise to a problem that already exists in respect of electricity supply—self-disconnection, which often happens without anyone concerned for the well-being of a family being aware of it. I would like some examination of the possibility of pursuing payment through attachment of earnings or deduction from wages.

At present, in the income support regulations, rent, mortgages, gas and electricity rank above water in respect of direct payments. It could be argued that the system needs to be better fine-tuned to reflect the importance of the water supply. That could satisfy the needs of water companies to recover their costs and allow the fine-tuning necessary to reflect a household's financial circumstances. Such a process would stop the use of county court summons and judgments, which create additional costs for water companies and their consumers.

On the broader issue of the Bill's proposals on the charging system, paying for water affects low-income families more than the rest of us. The charges that they have to bear must be balanced against their other pressing needs for food, clothing and accommodation. That affects many in the north-east, where many people are workless and median wages are lower than they are elsewhere. The spatial and demographic reality in which Northumbrian Water operates means that many of its customers are poor and most of them are clustered in large conurbations such as Tyneside, Wearside and Teesside on the coast. Meeting environmental standards and servicing large centres of population mean that the capital cost of the utilities is high, and that has to be reflected in household bills. The Bill provides that the rateable value factor will remain a basis for charging after 2000, creating some stability for the industry and the regulator in judging the equity of household charges. However, everyone recognises that this is not a long-term position and that a new methodology will soon have to be devised to calculate the household charge. That gives the Government a window of opportunity to consider the matter on a far broader canvas.

There is a case for detailed examination of the elements that make up the factors in water charging: the environmental issues that flow from the present water supply infrastructure provision on the ground; the need to stop wastage and leaks caused by outdated piping and drainage; the need to consider the matter on a truly national basis to iron out the geographical and social inequalities that result from the boundaries of the present water companies; the costs that water companies pass on to their customers for running their central office services; the possible contribution that water companies receive

[Dr. Kumar]

from their subsidiary operations, something of importance given that many of them have branched out into other activities, such as waste management and environmental consultancy, which can be highly profitable; and the need to balance the needs and demands of—and returns to—industries and institutional users against those of household consumers.

The Government should consider whether cross-subsidies exist, or could be induced, to benefit both consumers and local industry. A good example of that exists in my area, where Northumbrian Water has recently completed one of the biggest infrastructure projects in the UK water industry. It consists of a totally new pipeline system and sewage pellet plant which will serve Tyneside and Teesside. It will also process industrial effluent and discharges from local industry. Such provision helps local industry directly and the charges for it can both defray the massive capital cost and eventually help to lighten the cost burden on the household consumer.

There should also be an investigation into how to maximise the efficient use of water. As the National Consumer Council suggested, the process could begin with a simple scheme providing, for example, statements on household goods of how much water they consume. With appliances such as washing machines and electric kettles, there is a correlation between the use of water and the cost of electricity supply, and that approach could allow consumers to make domestic purchases that help both the environment and the household budget.

There is a responsibility on Government, too, to assess the impact of water charges on the social security budget and find how the social security system can best help the poorest with their water charges. A key need is to ensure that the regulator has a duty to examine the need of the poorest written into his or her job description.

There is room to build partnerships. There must be a partnership between Government and industry that gives the industry the stability, confidence and time to plan for the infrastructure and environmental improvements that everyone knows are necessary. There must be a partnership between the community and consumer champions. Partnership should mean that no one becomes ill or sick as a result of having water turned off at the tap. Such partnerships must have a key objective of ensuring that the water supply becomes a vital weapon in improving the quality of life of all our people—the objective originally set when the boards of works and local councils were established in the 1880s. On behalf of my constituents, I commend the Bill and wish it speedy progress through the House.

6.58 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I congratulate the Minister on being first out of the starting blocks with a new Bill in this Session. I will not seek to pour cold water on his achievement in securing pole position, as I am sure that the experience that he will acquire in taking it through the House will prove invaluable when more substantial environment Bills are brought forward.

The Liberal Democrats support some aspects of the Bill. We recognise that water is not a commodity to be traded, like petrol or steel, but a necessity. We applaud the Government's intention to ban disconnections and prohibit water-limiting devices, matters on which we too have campaigned. I was surprised that the Conservative spokesman dwelt at such length if not on defending disconnections, at least on minimising their extent. His reasons became clearer when he confirmed that he would prefer to have his water switched off for two days than lose his television.

We do not believe that water companies require disconnection powers to ensure that "won't pays" pay their bills; attachments of earnings or benefits, or the bailiffs should suffice. After all, I hear no clamour from the Scottish water and sewerage authorities and local authorities for powers of disconnection. However, we do accept water companies' concerns about the difficulties that they encounter with the small number of "won't pays" who work the system. Therefore, I ask the Government to consider reviewing the process to allow action to be take more quickly in cases where people are clearly and deliberately avoiding paying their bills. We support the changes relating to the Water Industry Commissioner for Scotland, even if, according to a lawyer who has closely examined the relevant clauses, the drafting appears to have been somewhat hasty. We may choose to return to that point in Committee. Our support is limited to those clauses.

The issue of water tends to leave egg on faces. In 1989, the Tories privatised 10 water companies at an administrative cost of £143.5 million, but they undervalued the companies by £873 million—not a negligible sum. It looks as though the Minister for the Environment will also be left with yolk on his tie—it would be quite visible on the tie that he is wearing today—for the Bill contains many unsatisfactory clauses and there are many unsatisfactory omissions.

The Bill extends the use of rateable value indefinitely beyond 31 March 2000, yet most rateable values are 25 years old and even the most recent are at least eight years old, so that hardly constitutes a fair method of charging. In opposition, Labour proposed a better system of water charging, set out in the document to which I referred earlier, "Ending the Meter Mania", which was published in April 1997. It was written by the right hon. Member for Holborn and St. Pancras (Mr. Dobson), who at that time was the shadow environment spokesman, and is now Secretary of State for Health. I am pleased that the Minister for the Environment has not disowned that document, in which Labour proposed using council tax bands, saying that that method

"provides the basis for a system of water charging that would be fair, reasonably simple and cheap to administer".

That is the system used in Scotland. As both the Labour party in its document and I accept, that system would need to be fine-tuned, perhaps with additional bands at either end of the scale, but it is a viable alternative to the use of outdated and therefore unfair rateable values. The use of that system should not be ruled out simply because there would be losers as well as winners, as I understood the Minister to say; that would be a strange way to legislate. A system based on council tax bands is one that the Liberal Democrats support and the Labour party used to support. We believe that the Government should set an early deadline for scrapping rateable values and replacing them with council tax bands.

The Bill allegedly provides for free meters, but there is no rejoicing in the streets about that proposal. The cost of those free meters is identified in the document not disowned by the Minister as being £4 billion. My local water company says of free meters:

"The changes to metering will certainly encourage more people to have a meter. It's the one or two person households in high rateable value homes who will benefit. Charges to everyone else, including the vulnerable groups, will go up."

Hon. Members may be thinking, it is a water company, so it would say that, but what about the Consumers Association, whose briefing states:

"We are concerned that the implications of this Bill are a policy of creeping metering"?

What of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, which says:

"the theme behind the Bill is increasing metering"?

What of the British Medical Association, which says:

"We are concerned that the customer choice will therefore be increasingly limited as the housing stock with water meters fitted increases",

and continues,

"Water metering has been shown to lead to reductions in use that threaten individual and public health"?

A water expert who advised the Environment Sub-Committee on water conservation and supply said:

"The Government has now agreed to a very expensive approach to charging households for water. It will progressively impose water metering on most households."

It is worth noting that two of the organisations that I have just mentioned were quoted in "Ending the Meter Mania" in support of Labour policy only 18 months ago.

The view held by diverse organisations is that the consumer choice on offer from Labour, to which the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) referred, is all one way: people can either have a meter now or eventually be forced to have one. If anyone is in doubt that the Government's policy is one of "creeping metering", they should consider the 4.4 million—or perhaps 5 million; we await an announcement—new homes that are expected to be built by 2016, which will all have meters.

As well as many flawed clauses in the Bill, there are significant omissions. The Government could have taken the opportunity to smooth out regional disparities in water prices by setting up a water services trust. Such a trust would be paid for by a levy on company profits and would fund water projects of national importance and provide grants and interest-free loans for the installation of water-efficient devices. I believe that Labour Members and even Conservative Members would support that.

The Government, who say that they believe in the principle of the "polluter pays", have made no attempt to address the question of charges for highway drainage. Not many people know it, but all water company customers pay the cost of highway drainage charges in their water bills. The Bill also fails to address the issue of abstraction licences. I am aware that the Government are consulting on that issue, but the Bill represents a wasted opportunity for a Government who claim to have put the environment at the heart of their policies. The Bill should have referred to water abstraction licences and required that they be time limited.

The Bill's overwhelming weakness is its unquantified impact on the poorest section of the population. Sutton and East Surrey Water, which is my local water company, estimates that unmeasured bills could increase by 27 per cent. if 50,000 of its customers opted for meters. Hon. Members may doubt the company's word, so let me quote again from the Consumers Association briefing, which states:

"We are concerned that the implication of this Bill is cross-subsidisation between measured and unmeasured users, meaning higher bills for unmetered consumers (due to the free meter policy)".

I can also refer to "Prospect for Prices", a document which states the belief that the Government's proposals on metering could add between 1.5 and 2.5 per cent. per annum to bills. That means higher bills for lower income households in lower rateable value properties, some of which may not be included in the groups listed by the Minister in his speech. Even if they were included in that list, they might not be able to afford the so-called average bill to which the Minister referred. The Government have at least recognised that critical defect and are apparently trying, in conjunction with Ofwat, to mitigate its effect; but it should have been addressed in the Bill, not as an afterthought.

The Bill has disappointed a wide range of organisations with an interest in water, whether water companies, pressure groups or health experts. It contains some welcome measures, but many flawed clauses, and there are some glaring omissions. The Bill extends obsolete rateable values; it does not end meter mania, but precipitates it; and it does not provide adequate protection for vulnerable groups. Despite all that, I shall observe the traditions of the House and not press the matter to a vote tonight, but I believe that the Bill will require extensive amendment in Committee.

7.9 pm

Mr. Richard Burden (Birmingham, Northfield): I have enjoyed the debate, as good points have been made by hon. Members on both side of the House. I was especially interested in the speech of the hon. Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale). Although I profoundly disagree with his remarks about pre-payment meters, his comments on responsibility for the supply pipe deserve consideration. I hope that he will not follow through on his statement that the issue might affect the way he votes, but the question of who is responsible for the supply pipe on consumers' premises will have to be addressed at some stage.

I was joint secretary of the all-party water group in the last Parliament and I welcome the fact that many of the measures that we argued for are in the Bill. My hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson), who spoke earlier, mentioned her Bill to ban water disconnections. I pay tribute to her and the work that she has done on that issue over the years. I tabled a private Member's Bill, the Water Conservation and Consumer Choice Bill, which not only called for a more systematic approach to water conservation and leakage, but sought to allow the consumer to choose whether to have a meter, rather than leaving the matter entirely in the hands of the water company or the water company and Ofwat. I welcome the fact that that issue is addressed in the Bill.

[Mr. Richard Burden]

This Government have had a real impact on the water industry. Shortly after we came to office, the water summit agreed a 10-point plan which signalled real improvements in water leakage prevention in the first two years. I also pay tribute to the progress made by the water companies. Many of those who know me may consider that quite surprising, as I spent much of my time in the last Parliament—and before I came to this place—criticising the water companies, the process leading to privatisation and many of the attitudes that followed it.

Following privatisation, the water companies seemed to adopt a gung-ho approach in their search for ever-increasing profits and dividends. Water prices increased by a third in real terms and any increases in quality did not match the increases in price. The disconnection option was used too readily, with a threefold increase in the number of disconnections in the year following privatisation. I got the feeling, in the immediate post-privatisation era, that the water companies' desire to underline the fact that they were now part of the private sector was leading to a loss of the public service ethos that is so important in the water industry. The water companies became disconnected from the communities that they served, and I believe that that attitude has caused many of their subsequent problems.

I am pleased to say that, since then, the water companies—including Severn Trent in my area—have shown a new sensitivity and a greater willingness to listen to criticism. Before privatisation, the then chairman of Severn Trent, John Bellak, was described as having the courage of the previous Government's convictions. The company was very political in the way that it managed its affairs. I welcome the fact that the situation has now changed. The company is doing important environmental work and supporting our region. It is backing the Millennium Point project, which is so important for the entire west midlands area, as well as regeneration projects such as the West Midlands First campaign, which is designed to promote the area as a centre for manufacturing. Those projects are vital in reconnecting the water industry and water companies with the communities that they serve.

I welcome the quality improvements that have been made and I am also pleased about the dramatic change in the water companies' attitudes towards people who have difficulty paying their bills. The disconnection rate is down significantly. Severn Trent is one of the companies that have established a charitable trust to help those customers who have difficulty with bill payments. We must give credit where it is due: it is important to recognise that changes have occurred.

However, do we assume from those changes that there is no need to worry about and outlaw disconnections? I think that that would be the wrong response. Disconnection is a matter of principle. The British Medical Association, the Royal College of Nursing and the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health have made powerful cases—many of which have been mentioned tonight—outlining the real public health risks involved with disconnection. Those risks involve not just the householder or the person who, for whatever reason, has not paid his or her bill, but entire families, including elderly relatives and children. Many people may suffer health risks as a result of disconnection. Allowing the disconnection of water supplies as a result of non-payment is no more acceptable or logical than responding to the non-payment of local taxes, such as council tax, by allowing rubbish to accumulate outside people's doors and removing their children from local schools. We are talking about a public service and the disconnection issue must be considered in that context.

Despite the changed attitudes of many water companies, they can still take a cavalier view of disconnection, especially in the short term. That was certainly the case in the debate that occurred prior to the High Court judgment regarding pre-payment meters, and I believe that a similar opinion crept into the speech of the hon. Member for North Thanet. We have been told that pre-payment meters are essentially a budgetary measure and that there is a consensus that no one should be cut off for non-payment of bills. However, the pre-payment meters introduced by Severn Trent and other water companies—which were said to be a budgeting aid designed to help people who had difficulty paying their bills—led to disconnections, which were later deemed to be illegal.

Although I welcome and support the initiatives taken by water companies and those promoted by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment—including easy payment schemes, staged payments and electronic payments at post offices and so on—any device that is said to be a budgetary aid but is used to threaten people with disconnection or a restricted water flow is not acceptable, for the same reasons that formal disconnection is not acceptable.

If we are to outlaw disconnections—and I believe that we should—we have an obligation to ensure that there are other remedies in place in the event of a wilful refusal to pay. We owe it to our customers to ensure that they do not bear the brunt of bills arising from non-payment. It is vital to ensure that the court system works effectively and that garnishee orders and measures such as attachment of earnings work effectively.

I welcome the Bill's extension of the time limit on using rateable values as the basis of water charging. Finding the best and fairest system of charging for water is a complicated issue. We must balance equity for customers with some consideration of ability to pay. We must also bear in mind sustainability and promote the conservation of water as a vital resource. It is not easy to find the ideal system that meets all those tests—in fact, there is no consensus in this country about what that system should be.

In the past, there has been a headlong rush in some quarters towards metering as a panacea to those problems. When I sat on the Opposition Benches in the last Parliament, I had no doubt that the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), preferred metering as the norm for water charging—he made that absolutely clear in this Chamber and in meetings with my hon. Friend the Member for Hillsborough and with me.

Mr. Brake: Does the hon. Gentleman concur with the view of the Consumers Association that the Government's current policy is one of creeping metering?

Mr. Burden: The matter is not as simple as that. I shall deal later with the impact of metering on other aspects—an issue raised by the hon. Gentleman and others—but I do not agree with his analysis of creeping water metering.

There are powerful arguments against using metering as the norm and as the basis of a water charging system. Some years ago the Save the Children Fund conducted a study of the effect of metering on low-income families. Companies and many water analysts have drawn attention to the huge capital cost involved in making metering the norm—some estimates have put it at about £3 billion. Various hon. Members have pointed out at various times that many of the costs of the water industry are not specifically related to volume. In some cases, it has been estimated that 60 per cent. of the costs of the water industry are not related to volume.

There are problems in seeing metering as the panacea for the future, but there is no consensus about what the alternative should be. That is why I believe that, at this stage, extending the use of rateable values to buy us time to reach a consensus is a responsible way of proceeding. It should be made clear to consumers that there is no obligation on them to have or not to have a meter. Of course there would have to be exceptions, some of which are covered in the Bill, but the principle is sound.

I have some concerns about where we go from here. First, the Bill raises the question whether customers should have the right to have a meter installed free. I have no problem with the suggestion that customers who want a meter should not be charged at the time of installation. However, nothing is free in the water industry; there is a knock-on cost. I have heard it said, sometimes by supporters of metering, that in the water charging system there is an excessive bias towards the unmeasured customer. Having examined the system, I do not agree that that is the case, but I would be worried if, as a consequence of the Bill, a customer's right to have a meter free resulted in the cost of the meter being borne only by the unmetered customer, through the tariff basket.

The Government probably intend a balance to be achieved, rather than the entire cost falling on the unmeasured customer, but I hope that my right hon. Friend the Minister can clear that up tonight or in Committee. It is unlikely that there is any difference in principle on that, but some of the more gung-ho supporters of metering in various institutions that have some influence on the matter may interpret it in that restricted way.

My second concern is where we go in future. The Bill is the right way of proceeding now, in the absence of a consensus on charging systems for the future. However, we must reach a consensus sooner or later on what the basis of charging for water should be. If metering for domestic use is promoted through publicity or through incentives such as free installation, those who will save money by having a meter installed will, entirely reasonably, opt to have a meter installed. The water companies have admitted that many of those will be households in properties with a higher rateable value. If those customers save money as a result of having a meter installed, it is likely that the water company will seek to recoup the cost elsewhere.

If the cost is recovered entirely from the unmeasured customer, the tariff basket will begin to be skewed. Unlike the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), I do not believe that that will inevitably lead to creeping metering, but as a society we must decide on the norm for charging for water in the future.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I have been listening to the hon. Gentleman's thoughtful speech with considerable interest. Does he believe that if all the categories of metered water customers are added together—those who apply for the free meter who are low-use customers and will therefore benefit and keep the meter, those who are high-use customers who use their sprinklers in summer and will be forced to take meters, those who buy houses that do not have rateable values, and those who buy houses in which a meter has been installed more than 12 months previously—there will be a vast increase in the proportion of metering, on a cumulative basis?

Mr. Burden: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that there will be an increase. My right hon. Friend said that the chances are that there will be an increase. We shall have to wait and see whether it will be vast. Already about 14 per cent. of households have a meter. If there is an incentive such as free installation, the chances are that more households will have meters. If those customers save money on their bills as a result, there will be some kind of knock-on.

The conclusion that I draw is that, in the absence of a consensus, it would be ridiculous to go headlong into trying to invent rateable values for all houses, whether they were built recently or not, or to go headlong for council tax charging, irrespective of the impact that that could have on low-income families if it were introduced without restructuring the council tax bands, or to go headlong for metering. A precipitate move down any of those roads would be wrong. That is why the Bill is right. We must be creative and examine different charging systems in different regions. We must accept that the objective is to develop a consensus that does not yet exist among Government or Opposition Members.

As I have made clear for many years, my preference is for an unmeasured system to be the basis of charging. The capital cost of metering is so high that that is not the most attractive basis for charging for water in the future. Through an unmeasured system it is possible to create a charging system more closely related to ability to pay, but it is not a simple equation.

There are powerful environmental arguments for metering. I have suggested that, as an alternative to metering, we should do more about leakage, and I have welcomed the efforts made so far by my right hon. and hon. Friends to deal with leakage. However, it was suggested to me last weekend that, if we move too far down the road of leakage control, that would involve an environmental cost in terms of landscape and so on. It is not a simple situation, but we must tackle it.

If, after discussion and debate, we decide that we want metering to play a substantial role in our water charging systems, we must be far more rigorous in finding ways of relating a metered system to the ability to pay. The initiatives in the Bill to protect vulnerable groups are welcome and long overdue. That could have been done by the previous Government, but was not.

To say that water charging should be based on average usage is a start, but average usage is not the same thing as ability to pay. We should commission research and try to find ways of relating a metered system not just to concepts of average usage, but to ability to pay. Only in that way will we be able to protect low-income customers effectively.

I welcome the Bill. It is precisely what we should be doing at this stage, in the absence of a national consensus. It contains important initiatives, from the extension of

[Mr. Burden]

rateable value to the protection of vulnerable groups. I am particularly pleased that we finally say what a civilised society should say: that domestic water disconnections should have no place in the water industry.

I hope that, after we have passed the Bill, we will move on and have a national debate to develop a consensus on a water charging system for the future. It should be based on ability to pay and ensure equity between customers—and it should promote sustainability and conservation, because water is an important and precious resource.

7.30 pm

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): The hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden) has put his finger on it. What is wrong with the Bill is that there is no consensus in the industry about whether this is the right way to proceed, and there is no consensus among those worried about vulnerable groups. The genuinely vulnerable are not the 640 who have been disconnected, but those who will pay more for their water as a result of the Bill.

The Bill is not particularly bad—its motives are good—but it is not a good Bill. It should have provided guidance for the water industry on how to charge for water in the years ahead. Instead, it has prolonged the uncertainty of the present system and failed to address many of the crucial issues, such as the environmental impact of the use of water.

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) said, the Bill does nothing to enhance competition within the industry, which is the most effective way to drive down the cost of water. It has little impact on the environment, provides little guidance for the long term and creates greater uncertainty. It is against that background of uncertainty that we must consider the Bill.

We have heard the rhetoric of Labour Members—they have expended much energy talking about what the Bill will do for the vulnerable and how it will protect people from being disconnected. However, the truly vulnerable are no longer being disconnected. In the past few years, there has been a decline in the number of people who have been disconnected. We must put the number of disconnections in context, and consider whether the Bill has been thought through, has logic and relates to some of the other essential utilities, such as electricity and gas.

We have no idea whether the system of rateable values will continue in the long term. The Bill does not say whether it will continue until 2005 or 2010. Without a final date for changing the system, there is no incentive for the industry, the Government or the regulator to find an acceptable, fair and modern method of delivering water to the consumer. Without that long-term solution, everyone is left with uncertainty.

The water industry will bear the cost of providing the meters. It may spend hundreds of millions of pounds for no purpose, because, in a few years' time, the Minister could present a new Bill that changed the system of charging. The water industry has spent several hundred million pounds on disconnections. If all those 640 people who have been disconnected this year for whatever reason were highly vulnerable—most of them were not—they could have done with the money that will be wasted by the industry.

It is crucial to separate the principles of charging and of disconnection. The Bill is required to sort out the long-term interests of water for the consumer and for the industry. However, we must be careful to put disconnections in context. The Bill puts into legislation what the industry already does very well voluntarily. The number of disconnections last year was one tenth the number in the last year of nationalised ownership of the water industry. Public ownership is not a guarantee that people will not be disconnected. Labour opposed privatisation, but few people are now disconnected, because in the private sector the industry has listened to important criticisms that have rightly been made about vulnerable people needing to be protected. It has responded to those criticisms: it has not always got it right but, by and large, the trend is down, and this year the number of disconnections is in three figures.

It is worth noting that, of those disconnections, two thirds are reconnected within 48 hours. I accept that those 48 hours may be miserable, but I am not sure that the Bill approaches the problem in the right way. The industry is concerned about the effect of the Bill on the cost of water, and on customer debt. It believes that customer debt will rise sharply, because the burden will be placed on the customers who pay their bills. We will end up with a water tax as well.

The downward trend in disconnections should have given the Government a better sense of how to proceed other than by legislation. The Minister said that the Bill will help millions of people. I am not sure who those millions of people are. We know that 640 people were disconnected because they did not pay their bills, but who are the millions who will be helped?

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): You have several times referred to those 640 people. It is my understanding that you are—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The hon. Gentleman must use the correct parliamentary language. He must remember that he should address the Chair.

Mr. Quinn: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Should not the hon. Gentleman refer to 640 households rather than to 640 people? Does he not diminish the problem by that reference?

Mr. Woodward: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point, and I do not want to quibble about whether the figure represents individuals or households, some of which may have one or two people. We are comparing like with like, so if there were 15,000 disconnections 10 years ago and the number for April to September this year is 640, those are the two figures that we should compare. If the hon. Gentleman wants to double this year's figure to 1,200, we should double the figure for 10 years ago to 30,000 to make a comparison. I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman's point is firmly made.

Who are the millions of people who will be helped by the Bill? It will certainly not be the millions who will have to pay more for their water. The Bill will fall heaviest on the people at the bottom of the pile—the honest people with little spare cash who pay their bills because they believe that that is the right thing to do. It would be interesting if the Minister were to tell us who those millions of people are.

Does the Minister believe that more or fewer people will refuse to pay as a result of the Bill? The number of people who refuse to pay their bills is declining. Will the Bill lead to a further decline, or will the number increase? If the Minister believes that it will increase, does he also accept that, if more people refuse to pay their bills, there will be more court work and more bureaucracy? One of the dangers of the Bill is that it will lead to more expensive water, more court work and more bureaucracy, yet not one drop of water will be delivered more efficiently.

The Bill does not address the problems of improvement in the service and of leakages. Those issues worry consumers of water. The Bill fails to deal with crucial matters that we know consumers care about.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford rightly asked the Minister whether a business impact assessment had been made of the effects of the Bill on water companies. Everyone must fear that the cost of forcing companies to supply free meters will be enormous. One water company in my constituency, Hyder, estimates that the cost of providing meters for a company with more than 1 million customers would result in an increase of about £25 a year in the average water bill.

When Labour was in opposition, it made much of its claim that it would take £50 from the average water bill of every consumer in the country. All that the Water Industry Bill will do is increase the bill of every consumer. Nothing in the legislation suggests that Labour will honour the commitment that it made to consumers to reduce their bills; but there is everything to suggest that it will bring about more bureaucracy in the industry, and will do nothing to address the problems of leakage, nothing to improve the service and nothing to force the price of water down. It appears that it will merely force the price of water up.

Hon. Members have made many other points about the impact of the Bill, and I feel that it is incumbent on the Government to deal with many of them, particularly in Committee. I feel, as do my constituents, that the Bill is fundamentally inadequate. It has missed the point. It dresses up, in the clothes of a claim to be here to help the vulnerable, a series of clauses that will not help the truly vulnerable: clauses that may lead to more expensive water for all such people, and that will do very little to lessen the environmental problems that have been mentioned.

This is not a very good Bill, but it could be improved considerably in Committee. I have no doubt that many questions remain to be answered then.

7.42 pm

Mr. Lawrie Quinn (Scarborough and Whitby): I speak on behalf of my constituents. Earlier speakers said that they had received no correspondence from their constituents about this vital matter, but, as I can prove, I have received many letters, especially about the equity of the current system.

I especially wish to mention a public house in Staithes, in my constituency, called the Captain Cook inn. It is a business, but, for rating purposes, it is also a domestic establishment. The landlord, Mr. Scott—who is also a ratepayer—has made many attempts to secure equity in terms of water use. The simple reason for his problem is that he has his own natural spring. He claims that he takes water from it, and he feels that Yorkshire Water is charging him unfairly for the water that he uses. Earlier, the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake)—the Liberal Democrats' spokesman—referred to abstraction licences. I hope that the Committee will consider that issue, which is particularly important to areas such as my constituency, where many people abstract their own water.

I commend the improvements made by my local water company as a result of the marketplace—as a result of the change in the culture. Given that I am talking about Yorkshire Water, many hon. Members may be surprised by the progress that has been made. As will be recalled, not so long ago there were drought problems, but—as, I believe, with Severn Trent—many changes have been made to the management ethos and the culture in the company. I commend Kevin Bond, who was managing director of Yorkshire Water, for the changes that he brought about.

Being on the coast, those living in Scarborough and Whitby are obviously concerned about the disposal of foul water—sewage. Again, I commend Yorkshire Water for the vast amount that it is investing in Yorkshire coast care. I do not think that would have happened without a change of ethos and emphasis that led to connecting with the community.

I believe that my water company has listened to my constituents, and that, in its responses to consultation that pre-dated the Bill, it recognised problems that are experienced in a very remote area. I also believe that we are right to implement key manifesto commitments made by many Labour Members, including me, in the run-up to the general election. Those to whom I spoke on the doorstep wanted us to make progress. I think that the Bill makes the progress that my constituents want, and I hope that, in Committee, we shall be able to deal with some of the technical detail that should be dealt with then.

7.46 pm

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): I welcome some of the provisions in the Bill. I agree strongly with what the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) said about the increase in metering and about council tax banding, but I shall say more about that later.

My main objection to the Bill is that, yet again, a key policy measure bundles Wales and England together in an entirely inappropriate way—in this instance, an especially inappropriate way. Things will be different for Scotland, although I understand the insistence of the Scottish National party that the issues in the Bill ought to be left to the Scottish Parliament. That, in effect, is what I shall say about the Welsh Assembly.

There is, of course, a reference to Wales in clause 14 of the Bill, which mentions the possibility of transferring functions from the Secretary of State to the Assembly. The sooner the better, I would say. It strikes me as essential that Wales should be free to devise its own policies, within the framework of a sustainable water strategy—a strategy that should exist within the wider framework of a sustainable development strategy, which, under the Government of Wales Act 1998, the Assembly is obliged to draw up. The Assembly should, of course, have the function of constructing such a sustainable development strategy for Wales.

I admit that it is not clear to me how much discussion the Bill will allow the Assembly in regard to the drawing up of a strategy, and I should be grateful if the Minister

[Mr. Cynog Dafis]

would elaborate. I do not suggest that Wales should be allowed to do what it likes, regardless of the ecological effect; no country should be allowed to do that. Wales, and the Assembly, will have to work within the framework of international agreements in respect of water conservation, biodiversity and so on.

It is well understood that water will become an increasingly important consideration in environmental sustainability during the next century, but, within that framework, Wales should have maximum autonomy and the power to develop and conserve its water resources as a vital environmental and economic asset, for that is what water is. I need not tell the House that water is a sensitive issue in Wales. In recent decades—or at least within my lifetime—we have seen the destruction of Welsh communities to enable the building of reservoirs for supplies to English cities. That has been enormously controversial, and has had profound political consequences for Wales.

We need distinct policies in Wales for practical reasons. In the first place, Wales has a plentiful water supply. To give just one example, between 1989 and 1998, there were eight years of below average rainfall and three of those were years of serious drought, but, in the area of Welsh Water, during that whole time, there where no hosepipe bans and no drought orders. The Environment Agency says that there are no low-flow rivers in Wales, so we have a water-rich environment.

In those circumstances, the argument for encouraging metering, which seems to be what the Government's policy is about—they view it as something that should be spread far and wide—to impose discipline on consumers is much weaker, but it will be advanced. As long as owners of new homes have no other choice, there will be a shift, or a slide, towards metering. We need to allow owners of new homes to choose not to have meters. That provision should be in the Bill.

We need to move as quickly as possible to an alternative method and we have had some debate on that. I do not want to say much more about it, except to mention that the bills of 91 per cent. of Dwr Cymru—Welsh Water—customers are calculated according to rateable values that were last assessed in 1973. As has already been said, support for the council tax banding method is wide. There is much to be said in favour of moving towards that soon. The point is that that decision should be taken by the National Assembly for Wales.

There are likely to be different investment priorities in Wales. Where there is a plentiful water supply, the problem of leakage may not have such a high priority. It is expensive to correct and, in Wales, it might be preferable—it would be preferable—to invest in higher-quality sewage treatment. We have such a programme in Wales through the green seas project. Priorities for investment should be decided by the Assembly and by the Environment Agency in Wales, in consultation with Dwr Cymru, and local authorities and others who have an interest in the matter.

I suppose that some people might argue that we need to reduce consumption in Wales as much as possible, so that we are better able to export water over the border, but it might be decided that we had better not say that too loudly. That brings me to the important issue of water transfers, particularly in the context of climate change.

Climate change in the United Kingdom, as elsewhere, if it is going to happen—I believe that it is on the cards—will by and large increase demand for water, while reducing supply. That will cause significant problems for certain areas of the UK, particularly the south-east of England, but not just the south-east.

Projections by the National Rivers Authority in 1994 gave figures for deficits in the water supply in 2021 under scenarios of high and low growth in demand. More recent information on climate change will probably make those figures even more daunting. According to those figures, the Thames region will have a projected deficit, even under conditions of low-demand growth. In a high-growth scenario, that was also true of the Severn Trent, Anglian and Wessex regions. Wales would have a surplus, even in a high-growth scenario.

In those circumstances, it is clear that there will be pressures to transfer water from Wales to parts of England—not just from Wales; perhaps from some northern regions of England as well—through impounding, the construction of reservoirs or simply transferring water from river to river through pumping schemes and such methods. It is important to say that that would be unacceptable because transferring water has biological, ecological and political consequences.

I make it clear that the days when Wales could be used as a convenient source of primary products for export—whether minerals, timber, agricultural products or water—must and will come to an end. The sensible thing, and what is in Wales's national self-interest, is not to move water to enable increased development elsewhere, whether we are talking about industry or housing, but to move the development to where the resource exists. In this case, it is water, but, increasingly, that will also mean energy. Energy will be generated on a dispersed basis and development will migrate towards places where the sustainable energy system exists.

To give just one example, it is probably better to grow vegetables and other such food products where there is adequate water supply, rather than to transfer water to provide large-scale irrigation to grow them in an arid part of south-east of England. Climate change projections show that parts of south-east England will become arid in 20 or 25 years. Other industries besides those, of course, need a lot of water. The priority for Wales, then, must be not to export water, even if we have a fair price for it—that has been the theme—but to add value to water while conserving it and the ecology that it supports.

That has significant economic and, over time, political implications for Wales and perhaps for the UK too, but it is important to recognise that we are not just talking about self-interest. It is better in every sense to do what I suggest. It is environmentally more benign and it would contribute to creating a more dispersed pattern of economic activity and prosperity. It would help to counteract the unhealthy concentration of everything, whether wealth, power, population or activity of all sorts, in the south-east of England.

The National Assembly for Wales will, therefore, need to develop a sustainable water strategy for Wales as an early priority, building on work that has already been done with the Environment Agency in Wales and Dwr Cymru. However, another early priority must be to transfer to the Assembly all the powers that it needs to fulfil that mission properly.

7.57 pm

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): As many hon. Members have said, water is one of the essentials of life. However, if one needs a reminder of how much we rely on a modern system of supply of that valuable commodity, one has only to visit a third-world country such as Nigeria, which I visited in September. One can see how great a part of the lives of millions of people in such countries is spent simply carrying water from the well or standpipe to the home, and all the consequences that that has not only for public health, but for the whole way in which those societies operate.

It is a measure of the failure of the previous Government, who devoted so much time to water with their water privatisation programme, that the Bill is necessary very early on in the Parliament to sort out the wholly unsatisfactory laws on charging. When water was privatised, many people questioned the ethics of making a profit out of that which falls freely on to the earth. The answer that was always given was that the profit would be made out of not the water, but the treatment and means of supply; yet, under the laws passed by the previous Government, the water companies are allowed to deprive people of water—the means of life—for non-payment. That reveals the previous Government's attitude towards and motivation for the privatisation programme: primarily, it was not public interest, but the furtherance of private profit.

The Government's pre-payment policies, and the Bill, aim to ensure the reverse—that privatised water companies serve the public interest. The Bill will therefore not allow disconnection of water to homes, schools and hospitals. Although no one is condoning non-payment, there clearly is no need to deprive someone of water—or air—as punishment for non-payment of bills. As hon. Members have already said—although I shall take the example further—one does not deprive someone of access to the national health service because he or she has not met an income tax demand. We have to learn the lessons of the past, and realise that the great advances in health in the United Kingdom were made by improving factors such as the water supply.

There are, as hon. Members have said, many other ways in which water companies can ensure that people pay their bills. I was pleased to hear that the Opposition spokesman, the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), thought that the Bill would provide a more effective means of ensuring that people paid their water bills.

Other provisions in the previous Government's legislation show equal disregard for consumers and citizens by permitting water companies to compel conversion to metering. Moreover, current legislation provides no right for customers to choose whether to use metering or to continue with the unmeasured system. Currently, water companies are also not obliged to supply free meters. The Bill will redress all those problems, and give rights to citizens and customers rather than to water companies.

As hon. Members have already said in this debate, in many cases, the Government are bringing the law into line with water companies' practices. We should always remember that many water companies tried to introduce pre-payment devices that were self-disconnecting. I was pleased that the council that I led played an important part in a campaign against the introduction of such devices. It is, therefore, simply unrealistic to say that everything will be all right if we leave the law as it is.

Mrs. Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): Does my hon. Friend agree that the situation, and legislation, in Scotland is completely different from that in the rest of the United Kingdom largely because of the campaigns waged in Scotland, especially the referendum conducted by Labour in the Strathclyde region—against the advice given by all quarters—showing that more than 90 per cent. of the population completely disagreed with water company privatisation?

Mr. Blizzard: My hon. Friend makes a very valuable point. Labour-controlled local authorities across the country, both north and south of the border, helped to resist some of the previous Government's worst proposals.

Mr. Burns: Such as?

Mr. Blizzard: I shall deal with another example shortly.

The Conservatives left us with another problem. Under their legislation, after 31 March 2000, it will no longer be possible to charge by rateable value. As I said earlier, I think that that date reveals the previous Government's agenda: to have everyone on a meter by that date. The previous Government made no move to introduce an alternative, and their excuse—that they ran out of time in which to do so—is untenable. As we all know, the legislative programme in the previous Government's final Session was very light. If they really wanted to do something about the matter, there was ample legislative time—in a Parliament that went on and on—to do so.

Public opinion knocked off course the previous Government's plans for universal water metering. We have been left instead with a situation that I shall describe as a parallel to the millennium bug—which we could call the millennium tap or millennium water pipe. If the Bill is not passed, we shall be left with the strange situation of having to convert everyone to a water meter very quickly, or to discover some other device to ensure that the law passed by the previous Government is upheld.

The Bill leaves open the option of a future charging system based on council tax. It will be interesting to see what happens. However, such a system would require reform of the council tax system and the introduction of more bands, so that there were not too many rich winners and too many poor losers—which is really a verdict on the current council tax structure. The Bill will also give tenants, not landlords the right to decide whether a meter will be installed in a home.

Current arrangements pose a problem particularly for local councils, such as mine, that want to be fair to their tenants. Requests for water meters are sometimes made by single, often elderly people—or by an elderly couple—living in a full-sized family home. Such requests cause councils a serious problem. If councils want to meet the needs of that person or couple, they will say, "Fine; install the meter." But what about the interests of tenants—perhaps a family on a low income—who move in after the elderly person or couple leave it?

[Mr. Blizzard]

My council introduced a policy prohibiting water meter installations in full-sized family properties occupied by a single elderly person. That was a very difficult decision to make, as it was not possible to balance the interests of the current tenant and of future tenants. Thankfully, the Bill will sort out the problem.

Mr. Burns: How?

Mr. Blizzard: The current tenant will be able to choose a meter, whereas future tenants in real need—who have medical needs or form a large family on low income—will be able to gain the Government help provided in the Bill.

Mr. Burns: I have been following the hon. Gentleman's fantasy philosophy with growing amazement. He has managed, on a very narrow basis, to pick out an example that fits his rather chronic argument. How will the Bill help the average family who may go into that large home and who have no medical problems?

Mr. Blizzard: I am talking not about average families, but about large families on a low income. Such families are disadvantaged by meters. The average family is not particularly disadvantaged by meters. The Bill deals with those who are seriously disadvantaged.

We should realise that metering has a valuable part to play in encouraging responsible water use and the management of—I was going to say of a scarce resource, which it was until this summer—a resource that is not unlimited. In the right culture, such practices will help to avoid waste and provide extremely useful tools. However, I am concerned about whether our water companies have the right culture.

I remember an Environmental Audit Committee sitting in which we were considering whether to hold a major inquiry on water services. The managing director of Severn Trent Water company—who was also chairman of Water UK, the water companies association—made a statement to us which greatly concerned me. He said:

"We do not believe that we should discourage people from using water in their gardens if they want to pay for it. If they use a sprinkler they have a meter . . . I have to listen to the arguments of my customers who say that if they have invested £25 in a plant because the climate will now sustain more exotic plants they are going to water it anyway. I have to listen to that because they are telling me what they intend to do with my product."

We have to remember that social equity is one of the principles of sustainability. It is unacceptable to allow people to consume huge amounts of water in using a sprinkler on an exotic plant or in filling up a swimming pool time after time just because they can pay for it, while asking ordinary people to be careful with water.

There is a lesson there for anyone who advocates heavy and crude environmental taxes. For example, if the fuel escalator, which was introduced by the previous Government, continues in a crude form, it may result in a rich person driving a car around while an ordinary person is restricted. We have to grapple with that principle.

To conserve the environment and to conserve water should mean sharing any curbs on our life style and sharing our inconveniences. Those who can afford to pay should not carry on with the old, unsustainable life style while those who cannot carry a burden. We need balance. The Bill takes us a long way towards achieving that in respect of water, which is why I support it.

8.11 pm

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): As my hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr. Woodward) said, it is hard to understand why we need the Bill. As I read the briefing material from the industry, it welcomes almost all the proposals. It is obvious that the great majority of the Bill's objectives could easily have been achieved by negotiation between the Government and the industry, which is naturally anxious to have good relations with the Government and with consumers. It is monitored by a number of bodies, including the Office of Water Services, which are directly answerable to the Government.

Conservative Members wonder why we are taking up time to introduce the Bill. The answer was given us by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson), who told us of the fun that Labour had condemning the water industry, and what she described as its fat cats, in the run-up to the election. She painted a picture of an industry that had been privatised by the Conservative Government and was exploiting its customers and cutting off water supplies, and a picture of hysteria, which she freely admitted assisted Labour in winning the election.

In a way, the Bill has arisen out of that hysteria. It is part of the Labour party's policy of suggesting to the public that the services that have been passed to the private sector—and which are almost universally admitted to be a success, because they have led to lower charges—are still a problem and that the water industry represents that problem.

The Minister for the Environment painted a picture of what he called vulnerable types who needed the protection of our benevolent Government. Despite its being pointed out to him that Ofwat has defined the criteria on which people may or may not be disconnected; despite the fact that that is backed up by a number of regional customer service commissions, which monitor all proposals for disconnection before they are allowed to go ahead; and despite Ofwat's statement that the disconnections are not of vulnerable people, but are valid—that is backed up by the fact that two thirds of people who are disconnected are reconnected by the simple device of paying the bill within 24 hours of the disconnection—he persisted in painting such a picture, as if half the households of this country were having their water supply disconnected.

There are 20 million households in this country; about 640 had short-term disconnection for wilful refusal to pay for the water that they had consumed. There is no acknowledgement of the fact that someone else has to pay the bill when people behave badly, and try it on and push authorities to the limit. Labour Members never mention all those respectable people on modest incomes who pay their way and pay their bills. As Ofwat has pointed out, people who are bad managers can get the Department of Social Security direct payments scheme to help them to meet their water bills by passing amounts from their benefit payments directly to the water companies—budgeted over the year, so that they do not get themselves into debt.

Several Labour Members have linked charges to ability to pay. That is not how an industry functions. We can tell that from Ofwat's briefing, which says that we must achieve

"a better relationship between charges and consumption."

People are asked to pay for their water because someone has to, and there should be a relationship between the amount of water consumed and charges borne. If the Government of the day require that certain people—those with large families or the elderly who live in certain types of accommodation—are given special help, that is the Government's job, not that of the industry. The industry's role is to fulfil the obligation placed on it with privatisation: to bring a derelict industry, which had been neglected for decades, up to modern standards. To achieve that, it must have resources. It is charged with raising those resources from its consumer base, and that is exactly what it does.

In the early days after privatisation, it was inevitable that water charges would rise, for the simple reason that the industry was so run down under public management, and its infrastructure so antique, that a massive amount of water was lost into the environment or into the soil. All those issues had to be dealt with quickly.

The industry was also charged not only with improving the quality of our water—which in many areas had become a lot less than safe—but with cleaning up our rivers, so that wildlife could flourish and we could have more fish swimming in our rivers. It also had to clean up our beaches and coastal waters, which had become highly polluted under public sector management and were unhealthy for bathing.

The industry had to reduce or eliminate the dumping of sewage sludge into the sea in pipes that were barely beyond the tidal level of the sea. Sewage was being washed back on to our beaches. The industry was given all those tasks, to improve the quality of water. Under public management, it had walked away from its responsibilities. They were tasked to the new industry, which has been doing its very best.

A few directors, whose incomes were profit-linked and linked to improvements that they produced, received relatively high salaries. The Labour party leapt on that and made it an enormous political issue—so we are debating a Bill that is largely unnecessary and could have been dealt with by negotiation between the industry and the Government.

Hon. Members have mentioned the prohibition of disconnection in particular. It has been pointed out time and again that the number of people being disconnected is going down rapidly. The message is getting through that these disconnections are bad news: they are bad news for the industry, the Government do not like them, politicians do not like them and they result in a bad reputation. Gradually, that problem is being overcome. We have gone from tens of thousands of disconnections under public ownership to practically none—about 600 cases this year, and that may be better still by next year—but the industry said in *The Daily Telegraph* that it is rightly concerned that

"this move will give a green light to people who simply don't want to pay."

There are always people who do not want to pay. They do not want to pay for gas or electricity and sometimes they do not want to pay in Marks and Spencer, so they pick up a few things and try to walk out of the store without paying. Nobody says that people should be allowed to get away with that, however poor and vulnerable they may be. The water industry is no different.

We keep hearing about how the precious commodity of water is in short supply. If Britain is blessed with anything, it is with a more than ample supply of water. The hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) has made that clear. The water companies are tasked with ensuring that that adequate water supply is properly managed so that we do not have droughts. Droughts are less a product of our climate than a result of the mismanagement of the industry over the years. The Government should not paint a picture of an industry that is careless of the interests of its clients, which it is not, and that overcharges, which it does not—the rate of increase in water charges dropped dramatically after the first period. If, as I expect, the industry follows the example of the other privatised utilities, water charges will start to come down in real terms. The Government would have served the industry better by leaving it alone—it is monitored by several agencies—to fulfil its task.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Many of my constituents will welcome the provisions in part II of the Bill, which establishes a water industry commissioner for Scotland. That will be a welcome change in Scotland to the legislation introduced by the hon. Lady's Government in 1994.

Mrs. Gorman: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman's constituents will be pleased. I am not au fait with the details for Scotland, because I expect the issue to be dealt with by the new Scottish Parliament. Three agencies—the Environment Agency, the drinking water inspectorate and Ofwat—already monitor the activities of the industry. It is very well managed and controlled. [*Interruption.*] The Government Whip is pointing to his watch and asking me to sit down. I have sat through the whole debate. I am fascinated by the subject and I intend to say what I came here to say.

Far from receiving brickbats from the Labour party, the water companies should be congratulated on the tremendous improvements that they have produced in the industry. We should not discourage them by adding to their costs with the provisions on metering. The enormous increase in the costs to the industry will be borne by the respectable customers who pay their bills. We should trust the industry, monitored as it is, to get on with its job. We shall go through the motions of the Bill, but we should remember that most of it has nothing to do with the needs of the industry and everything to do with the Labour party's rhetoric in the run-up to the general election.

8.24 pm

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on the robust and effective way in which he and his colleagues at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions have addressed so many water quality and cost issues in their first 18 months in government, as well as some key associated environmental concerns. Significant steps have been taken to meet our manifesto commitment to pursue

"tough, efficient regulation in the interests of customers and, in the case of water, in the interests of the environment as well".

[Mrs. Linda Gilroy]

Many of my constituents, who face the highest water bills in the country, will welcome the Bill. By removing the water companies' power to disconnect the water supply to private dwellings, by prohibiting them from using devices to reduce the amount of water available for use to enforce bill payment and by introducing the power to make regulations in respect of charging schemes, the Bill will give important new protection to vulnerable customers.

The Bill will go a long way towards achieving a fair and affordable water supply for vulnerable customers and offers an increase in customer control and choice over how water is provided to them and how they pay for it. That will offer substantial help to many people, particularly in the south-west, where water bills are the highest. According to the report produced by the House of Commons Library as a background to the Bill, the average bill in the south-west for 1998–99 is £354, compared with the average for all water companies in England and Wales of £242.

In the Labour party's document "In Trust for Tomorrow" we said that we would

"outlaw disconnection for residential properties and ban compulsory water metering".

The Bill implements that policy clearly and unequivocally.

Balancing price and quality and taking into account environmental considerations is difficult without causing undue tension for one of the key stakeholders. Nowhere has that proved more true than in the south-west over water. The average bill of £354 is 10 per cent. of the income of many less-well-off households. Many pensioners and younger people in my constituency live on incomes of between £2,000 and £4,000. It is little wonder that, faced with such a situation and the many other competing needs for food, warmth and clothing, some of them have problems with payment. I can say with confidence that the measures proposed in the Bill will help many of my constituents.

That is why I have taken a particular interest in the way our policies to regulate the utilities, particularly water pricing, have developed since the election. I am astonished that not a single Member from the Opposition parties representing Devon or Cornwall is present for this important debate. The Liberal Democrats, who have been vociferous on water issues, are conspicuous by their absence. I understand that they intend to oppose the Bill because it represents the creeping advance of metering. Many elderly people in Devon and Cornwall would like to be better able to assess whether water meters would be of value to them and would be interested to know that that is the Liberal Democrats' policy. I shall ensure that they do know about it.

I know that my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment shares my concerns about water charges, about the substantial increases since privatisation and about the burden that they place on my constituents. Water companies with long coastlines have passed on to customers the consequences of the environmental programme that goes with their responsibility for treating waste water and sewerage. The uneven distribution between companies of responsibilities for the coastline and the beaches causes fundamental social and economic concerns.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, in the guidelines "Raising the Quality", published the environmental and quality objectives to be achieved by the industry in the period 2000-05. They offer the prospect of an ambitious programme to improve water and environmental quality coupled with widespread real reductions in water and sewerage bills for the first time since the companies were privatised in 1989. Reductions in water bills of 10 per cent. and possibly more are a real prospect.

I hope that we will begin to go further in narrowing the differential between water charges in the south-west and elsewhere. In "Raising the Quality" the Secretary of State asked the regulator to give special consideration to the regional impact of the quality programme:

"We will wish to ensure that the detailed obligations at company level are defined in a way which avoids unacceptable impacts on water prices in different parts of England and Wales and reflects local environmental priorities. We will provide further guidance on this as necessary as the programme is defined at company level."

I welcome those statements and invite my hon. Friend in responding to the debate to confirm that he believes that there is some scope for addressing the wide gap between what my constituents have to pay compared with charges in the rest of the country. That has considerable general bearing on the vulnerable customers who can benefit from the Water Industry Bill as well as specific relevance.

Mr. Brake: If the hon. Lady is on the Standing Committee considering the Bill and if the Liberal Democrats table an amendment to address the regional disparity in water prices, perhaps she will support us. Let me also point out that at present there is a greater proportion of Liberal Democrat Members in the Chamber than Labour or Tory Members.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): But not Scottish Nationalists.

Mr. Brake: True.

Mrs. Gilroy: Still, Liberal Democrats representing the part of the country that suffers the most problems are conspicuous by their complete absence. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) mentioned the consideration of the Bill in Committee. I shall cover some of the issues in my speech, but I am not sure that the Bill—welcome though it is—is the vehicle for achieving the objective that I share with Liberal Democrat Members with constituencies in Devon and Cornwall.

Under the present proposals, customers in England and Wales will continue to pay very different bills, with my constituents shouldering a greater burden than others. It seems wrong that households in one part of the country should be penalised for the performance of their local water company or because they live in a particular place. Reference has been made to the fact that water meters measure only water volume and not sewerage, yet it is sewerage charges that cause my constituents' bills to be so high. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden), who said that we should look at many issues relating to metering in the longer term.

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Lady said that she thought that the Bill might not be the right vehicle for an amendment

such as that described by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake). Has she noticed that clause 5(4) specifically prohibits the Secretary of State from making any such move under the Bill?

Mrs. Gillroy: I shall come to that in just a moment.

Following discussions with the stakeholders in the south-west, I approached my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State with proposals for a water quality fund. I know that "Raising the Quality" restates the principle that quality improvements have to be paid for by water and sewerage customers, but the "polluter pays" principle has been used as an argument against the consideration of such a fund. I am not at all sure that all polluters do pay or that there is any practical way of making them do so.

The whole country benefits from improvements in bathing water and the avoidance of prosecution by the European Union—the state, rather than one region, has an obligation to comply with standards—yet only those living in coastal regions end up paying for improvements. On equity grounds, I believe that there are sound arguments for a scheme that smooths the difference in bills arising from those factors and, although it may be difficult to achieve that under the present legislative and regulatory framework, I urge my hon. Friend to examine that proposal.

Clauses 4 and 5 give the Secretary of State powers to make regulations on charging schemes. They are intended to allow him to protect customers who are vulnerable owing to ill health, disability or financial circumstances, by specifying the nature of the support that they may receive. That could include a requirement to charge such households the average bill for the company.

I hope that, through the Bill, my right hon. Friend will ensure that the regulations can protect these vulnerable customers in the south-west from high average bills which mean that they could be paying £153 more than those in the Thames region, where the average bill is only £201. Perhaps my hon. Friend could refer to that in his reply to the debate or, if time does not permit, write to me to clarify his view on an issue of great importance to some of my constituents. He may also care to ponder how a Cabinet Minister would feel if he received a £7,000 bill for water and sewerage charges, which would reflect a similar proportion of his income.

My right hon. Friend and his colleagues in the DETR have shown considerable political will and focus in bringing forward their proposals to ban disconnection, to put the consumer in the driving seat on metering, and to provide choices in the methods of charging and protecting vulnerable customers. Those measures will all be of significant value. The Bill is an important milestone; it will contribute to our agenda of fairness and social justice and I commend it to the House.

8.35 pm

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I was interested to hear what my hon. Friend the Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) said about value added; he argued that Welsh water should not be exported but that the industries and jobs that needed the water should be moved to where the water was. In Scotland, of course, we have a different concept of value added—we change our water into whisky before we export it.

I shall be brief as only a small part of the Bill—clauses 12 and 14 and some of the schedules—has any relevance to Scotland. The provisions are tacked rather uncomfortably on to the end of more substantial and totally different proposals for England and Wales. It was significant that the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns), in opening for the Opposition, did not discuss the Scottish clauses, which perhaps reflected his party's political prospects north of the border.

The debate concerns the principles rather than the details of the Bill. For me, the Bill contains two important principles. First, it deals with an issue that has been devolved to the Scottish Parliament under the Scotland Act 1998, which recently received Royal Assent. The Scottish National party believes that the matter should be left for that Parliament, which will be set up next year, to consider.

Secondly, I believe that the overriding desire of the Scottish people is not for a water regulator but for full democratic control of, and accountability in, the water industry in Scotland. The Government have done a U-turn on their pre-election commitments on that. In December 1997, the Secretary of State for Scotland said:

"The Labour Party manifesto included a commitment to return the Scottish water industry to local democratic control."

In response to a question that I asked, he said,

"we are strengthening the democratic controls".—[*Official Report*, 16 December 1997; Vol. 303, c. 154.]

The Bill fails to deliver on that commitment. A regulator will still be democratically unaccountable—the Bill may impose more controls, but they are hardly democratic. If the Government had any desire truly to democratise Scottish water, they could have used the Bill to do so. The fact that they did not must lead us to conclude that they have no intention of fulfilling their manifesto pledge.

My party will seek to remove the provisions in the Bill that deal with Scotland. It is an affront to the spirit of the Scotland Act that such measures are being dragged through the House on the coat tails of a Bill for England and Wales. As the measures will have to be implemented by the Scottish Executive in any case, it makes no sense for Westminster to impose a framework for them. The Scottish Office—and the House of Commons—should leave the Executive to make up their own minds about the powers of the consumer council area committees, about the role of any regulator, if there is one, and about how those bodies and individuals are to be financed.

The Scottish National party will seek to introduce legislation in the Scottish Parliament to return water to democratic control, a policy that I am sure will have widespread support among a range of Members of the Scottish Parliament. I believe that, by imposing the system proposed in the Bill, the Government are crudely attempting to tie the hands of the Parliament in any future review of the Scottish water industry. Indeed, the Secretary of State for Scotland confirmed that that was so. Of the Parliament, he said:

"I would expect that it will wish to allow the system to settle, and to perform, before considering any further options."—[*Official Report*, 16 December 1997; Vol. 303, c. 147.]

Next May, the people of Scotland will vote for parties with distinctive proposals for Scottish water. They will not look kindly on a Labour Government who use Westminster to put up barriers to real reform. There is no

[Mr. Alasdair Morgan]

justification for introducing a system now and using it as an excuse for preventing the Scottish Parliament from making further changes.

What we have here is a far cry from what was planned by the right hon. Member for Hamilton, South (Mr. Robertson), who said at the Scottish Labour party conference before the election:

"On my first day in St. Andrews house, I will end this undemocratic farce."

Of course the right hon. Gentleman bypassed St. Andrew's house and went straight to the Ministry of Defence. However, that does not excuse his colleagues in not carrying the plan forward.

The Government will not be able to use the Bill to run away from the issue of democratising Scottish water at the May election in Scotland. The Scottish water industry needs detailed proposals to restore full democratic accountability. We will not seek to oppose Second Reading, as a number of measures proposed for England and Wales are welcome. However, we shall certainly seek to amend the Bill as it passes through the House.

8.41 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): This is a comparatively short Bill, so I shall keep my remarks short. I wish to comment on two points only, but I begin by congratulating the Government on the way in which the review that led to the Bill was carried out. The review was timely, and followed the Government's decision that there had to be an alternative to metering charges from April 2000. The manner in which the review was carried out—by consultation and by responding to the representations received—was commendable.

I wish to refer, first, to disconnections and, secondly, to the alternative to metering charges. On disconnections, the representations received in response to the consultation have not been strong enough to overturn Labour's determination to end the unfair practice of disconnecting people's water supply. Access to water is a basic entitlement, by reason of health, hygiene and social justice.

Water companies will lose the ability to threaten cut-offs of supply, but that does not necessarily mean that bad debts must rise in response. We have heard tonight that two companies have a policy of no cut-offs of supply, and nine companies have carried out no disconnections at all in the first six months of the financial year 1998–99. The Government strongly support water companies in their measures to avert bad debt—for example, the creation of the charitable trusts; providing easy-payment schemes; new designs of tariffs; helping customers to reduce their bills and minimise their use of water; and continuing direct payments from the Department of Social Security in appropriate cases.

Severn Trent, the largest water supplier in the west midlands, has written to me to say that it has a good story to tell in terms of such measures. Its charitable trust has helped more than 2,500 households, and it is a co-founder of a pay point scheme which allows the payment by instalments of water bills at more than 1,200 shops and petrol stations in the region. In the past six months, only two disconnections of household properties have been carried out, among 3.5 million customers.

I must not mislead the House into thinking that Severn Trent does not mind losing the power to disconnect—it does mind. I disagree with the company on the principle of disconnection, but I agree that it has a good point in terms of the practice of enforcing payment by customers. The civil debt recovery system is not as good as we have been led to believe by some hon. Members today.

Severn Trent referred me to a letter—which I must admit I missed—in *The Times* on 27 November from a solicitor in private practice, who said:

"As a practising solicitor I can think of no instance in the last five years when a bailiff alone has managed to recover either money or goods . . . University research that I have seen shows that after county court proceedings in the small claims courts only a minority of defendants paid up on time.

After six months many had still not paid. If the water industry is to rely on bailiffs it may as well write off those debts now."

That is a gloomy prognosis for the companies.

I had 20 years' experience in private practice as a solicitor before I became a Member of Parliament. Generally speaking, the enforcement system in the county court can work, but it is a bit of a creaking machine. I recommend that Ministers take an interest in the Lord Chancellor's Department's work to improve the enforcement of judgment debts, because, even in my short time as a Member of Parliament, I have received many representations from individuals and businesses who have had difficulty in getting payment even when they have won their county court cases.

There is broad agreement that we should keep open a choice of alternatives to compulsory metering. Most agree that, for the time being, rateable value is the only realistic option. For example, the Ofwat National Customer Council submission that we have all received says that it is the only alternative at present. It is not, however, a satisfactory alternative to metering. There have been no new rateable valuations since 1990, and all new houses have to be metered.

People do not understand how rateable values that have ceased to exist none the less determine how their water bills are made up, and there are injustices in past valuations that cannot be remedied retrospectively today. I have dealt with complaints from constituents who could not understand why they could not change their rateable value when they found that it was out of line with their neighbours'.

The citizens advice bureaux and the Ofwat National Customer Council report significant numbers of complaints on that point. If rateable valuations remain the only alternative to meters for very long, the choice will become less and less meaningful. That is why the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health has described the Government's proposals as "metering by stealth". I hope that the Government will eventually listen to the calls for access to council tax data, and I note that they have not ruled out the possibility in their response to the representations received.

Some Conservative Members described the Bill as an opportunity missed. I agree in one respect: the Government missed the opportunity to introduce the excellent proposals contained in my ten-minute Bill in the previous Session. The Water Charges (Amendment) Bill would have brought relief to the small, privately owned sewage works in rural areas. However, before the Minister thinks of saying anything sympathetic or encouraging

about that Bill, let me tip him the wink and explain that it was a Government Whip who objected to it, so he should not be tempted.

8.48 pm

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): We have had a lot of discussion about a little Bill. The socially concerned aspects of the debate, in particular, have had nothing to do with the Bill. I am delighted that Conservative Front Benchers do not support metering. In 1988, roads in the Isle of Wight started being dug up in one of the biggest social experiments ever in compulsory water metering: 95 per cent. of households were metered over three years, with almost 60,000 meters fitted.

The Isle of Wight was the largest of the 11 compulsory metering areas. What was the result of that great experiment? No reference is made to it in any of the background briefing for the Bill, and the industry does not seem to have remarked on it at all. After the experiment, 60 per cent. were better off, with 20 per cent. substantially better off.

The people who benefited most were not the little grannies in modest but fairly well-rated houses, but the people with enormous holiday homes who used them only during August. Some 40 per cent. of people were worse off, of whom 15 to 20 per cent. were considerably worse off, because at that time no provision was made in the benefit regulations to compensate people for the new bills that they had to pay.

Families with two children on a disposable income of £60 a week suddenly had to find an extra £5 to £8 a week to pay for water. I am glad that hon. Members have referred to the public health importance of water, because I saw the result of that policy. Children went unwashed, and when I visited little houses as the family doctor, I could hear the loo being flushed as I walked up the garden path. They knew I was coming, and they were embarrassed by the smell. It is disgraceful that that experiment was allowed to happen.

The Government have had to introduce a Bill because the time restraints on the previous legislation meant that something had to be done before April 2000, but they have not thought it through. If we take the Bill at face value and accept what the Minister said, within the area of each water supplier, communities will have a choice. However, the Bill will make it impossible to have a meaningful discussion on structuring tariffs to protect people, such as the elderly person with a small need for water living in a large house.

If the Government had been brave enough to have a policy, we could have gone back to a system based on rateable value and where people live, in the hope that that had some relationship to their disposable income, or we could have had water metering with a system that had some input into bills by suggesting how tariffs could be drawn up. Under such a system, standing charges and how much is paid for the essential amount of water per person in the household could have been written into the regulations.

Ofwat has been useless. With the previous Government, it galloped towards the metering of water. The Bill pretends that choice will exist, but it will not, because metering is a one-way street. Householders will be able to change their minds once, and go back a few steps, but most of the arrows point downstream, to inevitable compulsory water metering. I hope that the Government will consider the results of the trials that have been carried out. Metering is disruptive, although it saves water, and that is good. A proper tariff structure must be built into water metering, and that is absent from the Bill.

Mr. Letwin: Is it Liberal Democrat policy to extend that approach to gas and electricity?

Dr. Brand: That is an interesting point, because three Conservative Members who have spoken equated all public utilities. However, people usually have a choice between gas and electricity for heating, and when the pinch comes, they can use coal. Many of my constituents still use coal because they cannot afford any other services—we are not a wealthy community. People can also use bottled gas or paraffin. But they have no choice about using water. In the 20th century, people should not have to try to flush their loos by taking a bucket to the stream or their rain butts.

Mr. Letwin: We are beginning to discover something interesting. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that there is a relevant analogy between gas, electricity and water? If what he is saying about water is correct, and poor people could find themselves unable to afford it if it is metered, however much choice there may be, the same must apply to commodities such as gas and electricity, which are also paid for by quantity.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. At this late stage in the debate, I am not sure that we should pursue other commodities. We should stick to water, which is the subject of the Bill.

Dr. Brand: There is no doubt that we are talking about a monopoly supplier of something that has a monopoly in its uniqueness, because its availability is necessary for life and civilisation to be sustained—plumbing did more for this nation than doctors ever did.

I am sorry that the Government have not taken an opportunity to do something positive in the Bill and to have a positive policy. If we ever want a system based on rateable valuables or council tax bands, we will need another Bill to de-meter people compulsorily. If the Bill is enacted as it stands, by the time an alternative is in place, most people will be stuck with metering.

I realise that I am using more than my customary six minutes, but, finally, I hope that the people who were compulsorily metered will have 12 months to change their minds after the passage of whatever Bill is finally enacted. I hope that they will have the same opportunity for choice as new consumers who opt for metering, if we are to continue with a hybrid system, as it is grossly unfair for people who have had no choice not to be given an opportunity to put the clock back.

8.57 pm

Mrs. Helen Brinton (Peterborough): I certainly welcome the principle of the Bill. Rateable value must be retained in the absence of any other universal—and fair—basis for water charging. Also, the very vulnerable people about whom we have been talking tonight must be protected, since we all understand that an adequate and

[Mrs. Helen Brinton]

clean water supply is essential for health. We have understood that since the great public health reforms of the previous century.

We certainly do not want to return to the days when poor living conditions were directly responsible for recurring epidemics of infectious diseases, as the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) will know. Many diseases today are still caused by a lack of clean water and of proper, adequate sanitation. Therefore, the provision of water is different from that of gas or electricity.

However, water is not a free good. The water we get from our taps is not the same as the water we would get by putting a bucket out in the rain. The water in the bucket is like any other raw natural material—it needs to be processed to make a product suitable and safe for human use. Therefore, it costs a great deal of money to provide an adequate supply of clean water.

The water companies have rightly been required to invest heavily in reducing leakage, and repairing and updating an antiquated infrastructure. However, we are not discussing merely a financial cost; the supply of water also carries environmental costs, which will rise sharply with increasing household consumption—more households using more water than ever before.

I welcomed with great happiness the Government's response to the report on housing by the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. It suggests that water companies should be given a role in the planning process, rather than simply being required to meet demand with supply. The Bill emphasises the need to protect vulnerable customers, and to give customers increased choice. We all agree that that is right. Nevertheless, I remain concerned that the Bill should not further the myth that water is a free commodity.

I fully commend the wish to ban domestic disconnection, because no one should be denied the right to water because they cannot pay, but what sort of measures will be put in place to ensure that the value of water—I stress the word "value"—is recognised, and that it is not simply a matter of "won't pay", rather than "can't pay"? I have seen figures that show that a sizeable number of customers whose water is disconnected pay their bills and are reconnected within 24 hours. That fact suggests that they may be unwilling rather than unable to pay. How will such people be made to pay?

I have some concerns on water metering. I welcome the power to make meters compulsory for those with pools and sprinklers. Metering is an essential tool, not only for charging but for managing demand and ensuring that customers use water wisely. High-volume users should pay on the basis of how much they use, but I am concerned about the idea of free meter installation, together with a customer right to revert to non-metered supply within 12 months.

Can the cost of free installation of meters on the basis of customer demand be justified with no more than a year's guaranteed use? Where will the necessary resources in cash and person power come from? What important, or even essential, investment and improvements will have to be sacrificed?

I understand that water meters cost £250 to install. If customers later choose to go back to being charged under the rateable value system, will not millions of pounds of investment be left underground and unused? I am sure that the Government have thought about those matters, but I should like the implications to be clarified. Would it not be better to expect customers to pay towards the cost of a meter, either initially or if they later decide to stop using it? For those who cannot afford £250, perhaps other means could be found to assist them if they wish to have a meter.

Let us not forget that climate change predictions mean that metering may become essential in some parts of the country. We have heard some comments on that tonight. The north and north-west are likely to have plenty of water—more even than now—but the south and south-east could become semi-arid regions. Unlike the case of electricity, it is impractical—indeed, ridiculous—to talk of some national grid to redistribute water according to need. This is not a good time to encourage extravagant attitudes to water use.

We may be in danger of allowing a part of our Government's wholly laudable agenda to promote social equity, which is what Labour Members want, to run counter to an equal and pressing need to conserve our environment. If we do not acknowledge the primacy of environmental concerns, we may be in danger of running against the tide of public opinion. Recent surveys show that the public understand the importance of environmental protection and enhancement.

If sections of the population still believe that they should be free to indulge wasteful and destructive life styles that are ultimately to the detriment of us all, it is well within the Government's agenda to discourage them.

Dr. Brand: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Brinton: No, I certainly will not at this stage.

The Bill is an excellent, much-needed social measure. Equal concentration on environmental aspects would only enhance it.

9.4 pm

Mr. Tony Colman (Putney): As we are running short of time, I have cut sections of my speech, but I commend the speech made by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson), which covered many of the points that I would have made.

The essential theme of the Bill is that of sustainable development—economic development, environmental protection and social equity being bound up with each other. Like other hon. Members, I find the damascene conversion of Conservative Front Benchers interesting, having had several discussions with the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), whom I hoped would attend the debate.

The hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) appears to have forgotten that it was the Conservative Government who were in charge during those 18 years of under-investment in the water industry. When privatisation occurred, a £1.1 billion dowry was given to the privatised companies and there was a £5 billion debt write-off; that was succeeded by a 100 per cent. increase in water and sewerage charges. The net result was a bonanza for shareholders.

One of the Labour Government's first actions in May 1997 was to hold the water summit, at which my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State for the Environment,

Transport and the Regions and the Minister for the Environment set matters right. The 10-point plan resulted in the water industry breathing a sigh of relief and getting off the bandwagon, having realised that they had to be accountable to the community. The consultation document was published earlier this year; the Government's response came on 18 November; and today, 7 December, we are having Second Reading of the Water Industry Bill. That is the sort of speed that I like to see the Government display.

For eight years, I was chairman of the Low Pay Unit. The postbag often reflected problems with water metering, especially in social housing. Much of that accommodation in cities was built by housing associations during the Conservative years, but large, low-income families who lived there often suffered as a result of water metering.

The problem is not only a city matter, but a rural one. I grew up in a small village in north Norfolk: my water supply consisted of buckets of water from the neighbouring stream; bathing involved the use of a tin bath in front of the fire once a month; and there was an earth closet at the end of the garden—we grew excellent potatoes. Now, we have Anglian Water, which has imposed an 84 per cent. increase in charges since privatisation and the average charge in the area is £288 per dwelling, compared to £200 in London. My hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) has told of the huge charges that are levied in the south-west.

Hon. Members have referred to what is missing from the Bill—the teeth that are missing from clause 5. The Government's response to the consultation document contains a page entitled "Competition", the provisions of which are absent from the Bill. There are proposals relating to the

"further development of inset appointments",

by, for example,

"allowing a number of premises to combine to meet the consumption limit"

and proposals relating to

"removing water companies' monopoly on making connections to the water supply system."

The main problem facing us is that there is no real competition in the water industry in England and Wales. Enron has moved in and bought out Wessex Water and French water companies have bought into Northumbrian Water and Three Valleys Water. Foreign-owned companies can buy and are buying up UK water companies, but UK water companies are not allowed to own each other. I suggest that the water industry needs an outbreak of competition.

We should consider how the UK water industry could develop internationally. We have spoken about sustainable development, and I pay tribute to the work that Thames Water, the London water company, has done. Having stopped the leaks, it is now working on sustainable systems in Turkey, Indonesia, Puerto Rico, Shanghai in China, Thailand and Malaysia. It is important that UK water companies are able to compete globally in developing good water and sewerage systems.

Last week, I was lucky enough to lead an Inter-Parliamentary Union delegation to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations in Rome, on a visit to examine sustainable development. One of the key points in the final statement was that all people should have a right to full, productive, equitable and participatory water use. The Bill is our step towards that goal, taken in our Parliament.

9.10 pm

Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas (Crosby): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for giving me the opportunity to speak in this important debate.

Water is a most valuable asset that makes possible life and death, equally. Under the Tory Administration, the privatisation of water was going to bring us many benefits. "Benefits" is an interesting word in that context. To most people, it means something more and something better. For the water authorities, it meant something more: more profits. It also meant something better: a better monetary return for the shareholders. Consideration of the stakeholder, the old and the young, and the environment was a necessary evil and was tolerated—just.

During the 1970s and 1980s, deregulation was the clarion call from business, and the Government duly responded. Many statutory regulations were relaxed and the onus of responsibility for compliance was passed along the chain to somewhere. The number of Government and local authority inspectors was reduced, and the public relaxed, secure in the knowledge that every business would be doing the right thing, having embraced deregulation. The people believed that, given the responsibility of managing themselves, the water companies would do just that.

To be fair, many water companies have behaved in a mature fashion and have been extremely diligent—but many have not. Given so much discretion, how many businesses would be prepared to do the right thing when it would undoubtedly dent the bottom line? How many would be prepared to revise charging programmes of their own free will and to install meters free of charge? Some did, but not all were willing. The deregulated water authorities were given enormous liberty, and then took enormous liberties with the British public.

Even the most damning public criticism failed to rein in the worst excesses of some water companies. I believe that only the threat of the Government's Water Industry Bill has brought the most pernicious operators to heel. Those companies were neither mature enough nor fit for deregulation: they needed to be restrained and told what to do because, left to their own devices, they failed to act responsibly. They have failed to do their best for the people of this country and for the environment on which we all depend. Their actions have led to the whole sector being publicly pilloried.

Many hon. Members and hon. Friends have spoken today, so I shall limit my comments to several clauses in the new Bill. Clauses 1 and 2 refer to disconnections. What was the collective moral position of the water industry that led it to disconnect nearly 21,000 homes during 1991-92? How could a responsible sector do that to the community that it served? Undoubtedly, the vast majority of individuals who suffered as a consequence were the most vulnerable, yet they were denied the most basic of needs. I am delighted that the Government intend to remove that right from the water companies. The disconnection policy gained a profit of a fraction of a penny per share—dare I suggest that the policy probably cost more than it realised? What motivates a company to apply such a punitive policy?

[Mrs. Claire Curtis-Thomas]

It is regrettable that the water companies have not seen fit to work together to protect the most vulnerable. I welcome the Bill's inclusion of measures to protect families on low incomes and people with certain medical conditions. However, we have challenged the water companies to do more—and there is more to be done.

I wish to introduce hon. Members to my constituent, Mr. Tebbit, who is desperately seeking a meter. Mr. Tebbit and I are both customers of North West Water, a company that has achieved an unenviable reputation for charging substantial sums for installing meters, ranging from £95 to £200. Mr. Tebbit wants to install a meter, but objects strongly—as do the Government—to paying for that service. Given that metering provides an incentive to reduce consumption, and hence supports conservation, Mr. Tebbit and I fail to understand why North West Water continues with that policy. The company is clearly more interested in retaining profits today rather than investing for tomorrow.

I am afraid that I must disagree with the shadow spokesman, the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns): I do not think that this is a Bill of soft options. Protecting the environment and the vulnerable is not a soft option; it is the new Labour Government in action. I congratulate the Government on introducing the Bill.

9.15 pm

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): In view of the time, I shall be brief. I echo the comments expressed by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden). The debate takes place in a different climate from that which existed at the time of privatisation.

I acknowledge the tremendous efforts that Severn Trent has made in developing a dialogue with Birmingham Members of Parliament and in listening to criticisms of past actions and current difficulties. None the less, there is a pressing need for measures to deal with charges and metering, and to regulate other aspects of the industry. For that reason, I welcome the Bill.

I am particularly pleased that the Bill deals with trickle flow or trickle valve systems. Many of us were concerned that, after the court case that led to the banning of water key devices, those systems would simply become a widespread alternative measure. I have no particular objection to the voluntary use of volumetric meters, but their use must be voluntary. I am glad that the Bill addresses the issue of choice.

The consultation paper dealt with the concern about charging for community rooms, but as far as I can see, the matter is not covered in the Bill. As I understand it, people living in sheltered accommodation could find that their community room was metered. I wonder whether water companies will try to extend that to other community rooms or even waiting rooms—for example, in schools and hospitals. We need to examine the matter further.

The issue of residential homes for elderly persons does not seem to have been covered. It is great that we will ensure that there can be no disconnection of services for hospitals or schools, but the position of residential homes must be reviewed.

It must be made clear that council tenants will have the same rights as other customers. I am particularly concerned about what will happen when there is a transfer of tenancy. Tenants will not necessarily be protected by the Bill. That seems to run counter to the views expressed by many local authorities during the consultation period.

I wonder how much faith we can have in Ofwat and the role of the regulator. It is worth remembering that the reason that Birmingham and other authorities had to go to court was that the regulator accepted the water companies' arguments that water key devices were mechanisms for self-disconnection. However, the judge pointed out that that was wholly unrealistic and a breach of the statutory code. Can we be confident that in future the regulator, on whom many of the Bill's aims will still rest, will take a more considered view of the issues?

My hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Mr. Colman) mentioned competition. We could make much more progress in that, but the sticking point seems to be the matter of common carriage. That is provided for in the gas and electricity industries, and there is no reason why the same should not apply to the water industry. However, we must ensure that water companies do not impose punitive charges on customers who want to move to a different company.

For example, I understand that Severn Trent has advised Birmingham Water, a potential private company, that were the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Birmingham to switch to another company, Severn Trent would impose a standing charge of £32,000. Such a charge cannot be justified. I hope that the Government will act to encourage competition and to ensure that such punitive charges, which are designed to thwart competition, are not permitted.

9.20 pm

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North-East): I welcome large parts of the Bill. I did not particularly want to speak on it, and have no wish to cross my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson) and for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden). I am speaking in the debate because I have been approached by many of my constituents, who believe that they will lose out as a result of the Bill.

I welcome the fact that disconnections are to be outlawed and that compulsory limiting devices are to be removed. The problem is that my constituents tell me that they need those limiting devices to be able to budget properly. They have been participating in an experiment with Anglian Water Services in my constituency and in Wellingborough. This self-imposed sanction of a limiting device has enabled them to budget carefully, and has helped them not only to pay their water bills, but to budget for their other bills. They say that, if the device is taken away, they will go back to their old ways and will not pay their bills.

I ask the Minister to consider allowing some people to have limiting devices in their homes voluntarily. I am opposed to water companies forcing people to have them, but some of my constituents argue strongly for these devices to be made available. They need not lead to cut-offs. With a limiting device, it takes 10 minutes instead of the usual couple of minutes to boil a kettle, and it takes 20 minutes to fill a wash basin. The Government could accept limiting devices and introduce regulations

that stipulate what the water companies can and cannot do. The default would not be cut-offs, but a return to normal billing methods. People would run up more debt by not paying their bills if they did not have the self-imposed sanction of limiting devices.

Some of the poorest people in my constituency have great difficulty budgeting. They feel that the Bill will affect them adversely. I welcome the Minister's comments about protecting the most vulnerable people. I ask the Government to consider the options in Committee, and to take notice of the vulnerable people who have told me that they will lose out as a result of the Bill.

The Government could take this matter on board without destroying the principle that compulsory limiting devices are wrong, and without going against the principle for which local authorities fought, which was that the introduction of limiting devices was unfair. The Bill is about choice, and I fear that the Bill will take away the choice of some of my constituents. The Minister should consider reinstating that choice in Committee.

9.23 pm

Ms Joan Walley (Stoke–on–Trent, North): I am grateful for the opportunity, however brief, to participate in the debate. I sat through the long days of the paving Bill and the subsequent legislation on water privatisation. This Bill is welcome, and the proposal to prohibit disconnections is a critical measure. I am sure that that provision will be fully explored in Committee.

I want to deal with the issue of environmental sustainability and public health. The Bill is a wonderful step forward, but I urge the Government to take on board the views of the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health and the second report of the UK Round Table on Sustainable Development. Recommendation FW3 states:

"The Government should review the regulatory structure of the water industry in all parts of the UK, and devise a system to resolve the inevitable conflicts which arise between the parties during the periodic review process. New powers should be made available to the regulators where necessary to implement their statutory duties. The outcome of the review should include an explicit duty on all regulators, including the Director General of Water Services, to take account of sustainable development."

I fear that proposals in the legislation that specifically concern metering and prices will conflict with issues relating to public health and sustainability. That has already been suggested by today's debate. We must be fully confident that, in the third water price review, Ofwat can reconcile all those issues, and I urge the Government to explore them during the later stages of the Bill.

The Bill will lead to far more metering, but not to 100 per cent. metering. I hope that my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary will refer to discussions that have taken place between the British Bathroom Council and Members of Parliament who fear that proposals in the new water by-laws to introduce a valve system as well as a siphon system of flushing could, without full metering, result in an enormous loss of water. It is vital for further research to be carried out on this aspect, for a proper standard to exist for any new valves that are introduced and for proper safeguards to operate at the point of sale to ensure that the highest standards apply.

I urge the Government to consider those issues during the later stages of the Bill, and to take account of my requests in respect of further consideration of the serviceability standards of sewers.

9.27 pm

Mrs. Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): I think it important for a Scottish Member to comment on the Bill—a Labour Scottish Member, that is.

Unlike England, Scotland has public water authorities. That is a result of campaigns conducted in Scotland to prevent the last Government from privatising Scottish water. However, changes are needed. First, we should have a commissioner, for whom proper provision should be made. The commissioner should be able to regulate all the financial aspects of the Bill. Secondly, we should have three consultative committees, one for each authority. It is important that that should be done now. The Scottish Parliament will be elected on 5 May next year—

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: It will be elected on 6 May.

Mrs. McKenna: On 6 May. Some have more of an interest in it than I do, and the date will stick in their minds.

The Scottish Parliament will meet for the first time on 1 July, and it will have a host of items to consider. What we are doing will enable it to bring the legislation into force very quickly if it chooses. It will not be imposed on the Parliament; it will be able to choose whether to implement it. We will take much of the work load from the Scottish Parliament if the Bill goes through the House now, and can be implemented immediately.

On those grounds, I entirely support what has been said today. I hope that, in Committee, people will see the sense of introducing such legislation, and of enabling the Scottish Parliament to implement it if it chooses. Given that it will reflect the current make-up of this Chamber, I am sure that it will choose to implement it, thereby lightening the work load and freeing itself to make decisions on other Scottish issues.

9.30 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): I am delighted that the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Mrs. McKenna) is able to assure the House that more than one quarter of the representatives of the Scottish Parliament will be Conservatives; I hope that she will prove to be right.

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) has said, in many ways, this is a cautious Bill. Indeed, as my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) made clear, in many respects, it is a cosmetic Bill. It largely restricts itself to enshrining what is already the case. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford said, there is no move to competition. There are no dazzling new charging systems. There is no major environmental advance.

As my hon. Friend the Member for West Chelmsford also said, and as has been repeatedly brought out in the debate, the Bill leaves a number of difficult questions of detail unresolved. Some were mentioned by my hon. Friend: for example, why are children's homes not exempt if schools and hospitals are? Some have come out in the debate. In a particularly thoughtful contribution, my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Mr. Gale) set out two issues: bailiffs distraining tenants' goods when the landlord fails to pay a water bill; and the cost of repairs of pipe from the meter to the stopcock.

[Mr. Oliver Letwin]

I believe that I am the proud possessor of the constituent with the greatest problem in the UK in that respect. Shortly after acquiring his house, he discovered that he had near on a mile of pipe from the water company's meter to his stopcock, a fact that he would have liked to discover before he bought the house. He now finds that he is unwittingly a major contributor to the investment programme of the UK water industry. The problem that my hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet brought up is perhaps most luridly exemplified by that, but there are many less lurid examples. In Committee, we shall want to deal with that issue.

Credit should be paid where credit is due. Labour Members also brought up serious issues of detail. One was voluntary BPU metering. It must be right that people who wish to plan their lives in an orderly fashion should be able to sign some special agreement with their water provider enabling them to install some form of BPU metering; I am sure that citizens advice bureaux and others throughout the country echo that. The Bill, probably unintentionally, prevents that. I would be happy if the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald), were willing to assure the House that that will be sympathetically entertained in Committee.

Although the Bill is, generally speaking, cautious and cosmetic, in two senses, it is extremely interesting; indeed, more interesting than some aspects of our debate have brought out. It is on those issues that I wish briefly to dwell.

As has been mentioned on several occasions, the Bill leads gradually, and subtly, to a vast and cumulative increase in the extent of metering. No one knows how fast that increase will be, but it is remorseless; it is a ratchet. I take it that it is intended to be a ratchet—a ratchet with great political sensitivity in that no one will be forced into metering. Indeed, people have the delicious prospect of being able to opt for metering on a trial basis to discover whether it reduces their bills and then to opt out of metering, with the proviso that the next person who lives in their house will end up being metered all the same.

The Bill does not just move subtly and sensitively towards metering, a goal that all hon. Members, or almost all, could share with the Government. It also brings a new and interesting principle into utility regulation. It explicitly permits the Secretary of State to intervene, through regulation, in charging structures.

The Minister for the Environment made it perfectly clear that he regarded himself and the Deputy Prime Minister as being greatly restricted by the Bill's terms in applying those regulations. I think that the element of the Bill to which he was implicitly referring was clause 5(4), which states:

"The power to make regulations under this section may not be exercised for the purpose of limiting the total revenues of relevant undertakers from charges fixed by or in accordance with charges schemes."

The problem is that, although we accept that it is important to restrict the Secretary of State from changing the total revenues, that is an entirely different proposition from restricting him from making changes to the balance of the charges. Unless I am mistaken—I should be more than willing to admit the mistake if Ministers wish to intervene—nothing in the Bill restricts the Secretary of State from altering any charges that he wishes to alter so long as, ultimately, the total revenue is not altered or—I should go a little further—so long as his "purpose" is not to alter the total revenue.

As there is relatively little understanding of the price elasticity of demand in water, it is not clear whether the Secretary of State might, by mistake, also alter the total. The Bill does not prohibit such an alteration but refers specifically to the "purpose". However, for now, let us ignore that point. The main point is that the Secretary of State—within the terms of the Bill, acting perfectly properly—can adjust the whole charging structure so long as his purpose is to ensure that the total revenues raised by charges overall remain constant.

None of us knows—I suppose that even current ministerial incumbents do not know—just how that regulatory power will be used. However, there were ample signs in the statements made in this debate, including those by Labour Members, that the Minister for the Environment intends to use the power to achieve what I suppose he would describe as a greater correlation between payment and the ability to pay. The power is intended, in other words, to introduce into United Kingdom utility regulation the opposite of the principle of economic transparency upon which, so far, the entire regulatory system has been built.

The fundamental principle of economic regulation of the United Kingdom's utilities has always been that it should be exactly that: economic regulation. Moreover, the principle has been that, in cases in which the Government intend, for perfectly good social reasons, to benefit a particular class of people, they should do so by means of explicit and transparent subsidy. The power provided in the Bill is the first time that a departure has been made from that principle. It is a very important departure.

The power is an example of a Secretary of State being able to tell essentially the Office of Water Services, and through it the water companies, how it is to structure charges to benefit those people in society whom the Secretary of State thinks it proper to benefit. The question arises: what is the argument for doing that? Moreover, if there is an argument for doing that, how far does it apply? Why does it not apply also to gas and electricity supply, or to the price of bread?

Labour Members waxed eloquent on the extraordinary importance of water, which no one denies. Water is a very important commodity—like bread, electricity and gas. For myself, I do not see very much difference between dying of cholera and dying of hypothermia; both prospects are appalling. If it is legitimate and proper for the Secretary of State to be given powers to alter the water charging structure, very quickly other Ministers may decide that, by analogy, they wish to introduce similar interventions in the charging structures of other utilities. Before we know it, we may be making such interventions in basic, vital commodities.

That is not new Labour but old socialism. It is not transparency of market products but a return to the use of the state to alter market dynamics and prices in such a way as to achieve certain social effects. If that is what the Government intend, they should come clean about it and announce that they have changed their mind and do not believe in the pure economic disciplines of a market

economy, with transparent subsidies to look after social groups, but are moving back to a world essentially of prices and incomes policies. The very idea behind prices and incomes policies was that one should protect certain socially disadvantaged groups by altering prices.

I am not saying that the Minister for the Environment wants to move there in one step; he is far too subtle for that. He has put only the first tentative marker on the route—a kind of motorway—that leads us down in that direction. My hon. Friend the Member for Billericay, in typically trenchant form, began to point that out, and she was quite right.

The Scottish elements constitute the second interesting aspect of the Bill. The Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, to whom the duty of making the Government winding-up speech falls, is the great expert in that domain. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear."] Indeed, he is particularly popular with Conservative Members for his ineffable courtesy and kindness in all respects.

A problem of a minor, constitutional variety has been pointed out by hon. Members on both sides of the House: why are those provisions in the Bill? The hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) has told us that, if he and his colleagues have their way, they will ensure that they are never invoked. If the Government really believed in Scottish devolution, they would not be introducing them, but would be waiting for the Scottish Parliament to do so.

I suspect that the Government are rather worried and find themselves in such a position that they believe that the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale may indeed be a member of the Scottish Government. They may also fear that the Conservative party will hold the balance of power, even if it does not hold 25 per cent. of the seats, in the Scottish Parliament. In such circumstances, it is forgivable that, even at this late hour, the Government are busily legislating for Scotland in this place in respect of matters that are utterly devolved under the Scotland Act 1998.

I mention that only as a mild form of teasing, but there is the serious question whether that is the precedent for another development, of which we have heard nothing: the idea that the famous third way should be implemented by introducing official regulators for public sector bodies. I have searched high and low, but I cannot find another example of that. I do not know of a case in which even the Minister for the Environment's own Department has yet suggested that remaining public sector bodies should have public sector regulators regulating them, independently from the Government. That is a most interesting proposition, which would be a remarkable and splendid test of this so-called third way.

If the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale and his hon. Friends do not control the Scottish Parliament and do not immediately undo this aspect of the Bill, we shall discover whether the Government will use Scotland as an experiment—in the way, to which Scottish Members sometimes object, that the Conservatives used it as an experiment for the poll tax—and the Government will discover whether using a public sector regulator to regulate a public sector body does or does not work. I venture a minor prophecy, which I may live to regret, although I doubt it: it will not work.

The Government believe that the most important aspect of a regulator is that he exists as an institution, and that the most important aspect of being regulated is that what is being regulated is separate from the regulator. The important thing about being a regulator, however, is that he is regulating something private, which his "owners" do not own. If the Government set up a public sector regulator to regulate a public sector body, they will find that nobody is regulating anybody. We shall discover the truth of that in due course.

In short, we cannot celebrate the Bill because it is too cautious and too cosmetic. We shall look at its effects with great interest over coming years in the two respects that I have described. In the meanwhile, I can guarantee the Government that we shall engage constructively in the discussion of the details in Committee.

9.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): This has been a constructive and positive debate and, if I have time, I shall respond to some of the wider points.

I begin by dealing with the Scottish provisions at part II of the Bill, which were raised by the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale (Mr. Morgan) and by my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Mrs. McKenna). As my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment said when opening the debate, the Scottish provisions deliver a commitment made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland in response to the outcome of the Scottish water industry review.

In conducting the review, we were guided by a number of important principles. We wanted to promote accountability, facilitate investment, promote efficiency, ensure continuity of public water supplies, protect public health and minimise disruption to the industry.

The previous Government created a problem by removing water from local authority control. As the Conservatives enjoyed no democratic mandate in Scotland, the water authorities were seen as unrepresentative and unaccountable. There was a real democratic deficit. The coming of the Scottish Parliament next July will change that.

The new Scottish Parliament will bring all public bodies in Scotland, including the water authorities, under strengthened and properly representative democratic control. By holding the Scottish Executive to account, the new Parliament will place the water authorities under the scrutiny that a modern democracy demands. That will be a crucial strengthening of the accountability and control of Scottish water authorities, and it will end for ever the perception and the reality of the democratic deficit.

The review gave careful consideration to a wide range of other proposals for the industry, including the possibility of returning it to pure local authority control. However, the recent local government reorganisation resulted in 32 unitary councils in Scotland covering the areas served by the three water authorities. Splitting up the three authorities between the 32 councils was quickly ruled out. It was clear that the number of councils made that solution impractical. It would have meant disproportionate costs, through the loss of economies of scale and through disruption, which would have been passed on to the customer.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: If the fire brigade and the police service can be administered by the elected members of the 32 local authorities, why is it not possible for water?

Mr. Macdonald: I was going to make a further point that will answer that.

Another option considered in the review was to transfer responsibility for water and sewerage services to joint boards of local authorities. However, we have to recognise that the water authorities are large businesses with massive investment requirements. The current regulated business model has provided scope for delivering large investment programmes. We also recognised the value of having individuals with business experience relevant to such undertakings on the water authority boards. Ensuring the representation of every council on the relevant water authority board would have resulted in large and unwieldy boards. We concluded that that made joint boards impractical.

As well as resolving the democratic deficit through the new Scottish Parliament, we also wanted to make the water authorities more responsive to local authorities, other local interests and customers. We have done that in two main ways. First, as we announced last December, we have increased the number of local authority councillors on the board of each authority so that they now constitute almost half the total. Secondly, we have issued a direction to the water authorities requiring them to consult regularly with the local authorities and other representative bodies in their areas. That direction was issued in August this year and early indications suggest that it is working well. The new commissioner will be responsible for continual monitoring of the responsiveness of the water authorities to local interests.

Taken together, those developments constitute a fundamental reform. We are providing what the Scottish people want: a water service unambiguously in the public sector, with clear democratic control by a Scottish Parliament, with strengthened local responsiveness and a professional, independent regulator.

The review also emphasised that the industry is in need of substantial investment if Scottish people are to have the quality of water service that they deserve. That investment is necessary to bring the quality of our water up to the best British and European standards, to protect our beaches, rivers and seas and to renew the infrastructure gifted us by previous generations, which more recent generations and Governments have neglected. Of course, it will have to be paid for by all water consumers. Those are facts that we cannot avoid or escape.

The Government are committed to securing substantial improvements in drinking water quality and standards of sewage treatment. To deliver that, we have already taken bold and difficult decisions on charges. That was necessary to bring about the modernisation of the water industry in Scotland. As a result, real progress is being made on investment. New water treatment plants are being built over the length and breadth of Scotland. All the main Scottish cities will benefit from brand new sewerage works by the end of 2000.

For the first time in generations, substantial sums are being invested in renewing our water mains and sewers. The three authorities should invest more than £1.5 billion over the next three years. That includes projects to the value of some £600 million that are being pursued in partnership with the private sector. We can already see benefits for customers from private sector innovation.

As I have already explained, the devolution settlement means that the water authorities will be under legitimate democratic control. The direction on local consultation and the increased councillor representation mean that the water authorities will be much more responsive to local concerns. Despite major changes, they remain public sector monopolies, so the Scottish people need a safeguard to ensure that the money that they pay in charges is being well spent.

The review recommended that an effective safeguard needed a new set of regulatory arrangements. That is why we are establishing the commissioner, who will be responsible for all aspects of economic regulation and for promoting the customer interest.

Under the new arrangements, the commissioner will be obliged to have regard to a range of factors relevant to the water authorities when framing advice on charges. Among those factors will be the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which the authorities use the resources at their disposal in delivering services to their customers. In short, it means sustained pressure on the authorities to deliver their services with maximum efficiency. Other important factors will be to ensure the authorities can deliver the required environmental and customer service standards.

The review also emphasised the importance of promoting customers' interests. The three consultative committees will help to discharge that role. They will advise the commissioner about the concerns of customers in their respective areas and the commissioner will have regard to that advice in discharging his or her functions.

The water authorities are making real progress in the way in which they deal with their customers. Nevertheless, we believe that the new arrangements will encourage yet greater sensitivity and responsiveness to the needs and expectations of customers.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: Will the Minister clarify a remark by the hon. Member for Cumbernauld and Kilsyth (Mrs. McKenna)? Is he implying that, if the Bill is enacted, clauses 12 and 13 will not be brought into force by the Secretary of State prior to 6 May next year? If that is the case and they are not implemented by then, will the power to bring them into force then devolve to the new Scottish Parliament?

Mr. Macdonald: I was about to explain that point as it was the main thrust of the hon. Gentleman's objections to the Bill. I should make it clear that we attach a high priority to the measures in the Bill. They will deliver real improvements to the arrangements for regulating the water industry in Scotland and real benefits to consumers. There was a consensus among the major consultees on the water industry review—the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, the customers council and the water authorities themselves—that that approach to regulation was sensible and the best way forward.

We believe that it would be wrong to delay taking steps that would allow the Scottish Executive to implement the new arrangements as soon as possible—if we did not take those steps now, another year would be lost. However, in legislating, we are not pre-empting decisions by the Parliament or by the Executive. It will be open to the Parliament to implement the provisions of the Bill as it sees fit.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale said, the hands of the Scottish Parliament will not be tied. It can either retain the proposed new arrangements or alter them in due course. It will be entirely up to the Parliament and the Executive to activate and implement the provisions. If they choose to do so—as I believe they will, given the support that the provisions have—they will be able to act straight away, so freeing up time in which the Parliament can undertake other important and pressing legislation. I am sure that the House will recognise that that is the right way in which to proceed, as I hope the hon. Gentleman will, on reflection, agree.

There have been a range of excellent and constructive contributions to the debate, particularly from my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield, Hillsborough (Helen Jackson), for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden), for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr. Quinn), for Waveney (Mr. Blizzard), for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy), for Stoke-on-Trent, North (Ms Walley), for Stafford (Mr. Kidney), for Peterborough (Mrs. Brinton), for Putney (Mr. Colman), for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis-Thomas), for Birmingham, Hall Green (Mr. McCabe) and for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey). Indeed, so many hon. Members spoke that I could not possibly list them all, but I acknowledge that hon. Members on both sides of the House made good contributions.

Some important points and suggestions were made, most of which will have to be dealt with in Committee, but I shall respond to one or two of them now in the hope of being helpful to members of the Committee and, indeed, the House. Hon. Members on both sides of the House, but especially my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South–West, mentioned budget payments and pre-payments. We are not opposed to the use of payment units as a convenient means of payment for customers who want one. Clauses 1 and 2 prohibit the cutting off of supplies or the use of a limiting device with the intention of enforcing payment. I hope that those who have expressed concern will be reassured by the fact that at least one company that has faced problems with payment is removing the cut-off valves, but is leaving the units as a means of budget payment.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sutton and other hon. Members mentioned regional disparity in pricing, referring in particular to South West Water. The positive answer to the problem in the south-west lies in the outcome of the periodic review. As a minimum, the Government expect in 2000 a reduction in prices for customers of South West Water that is broadly in line with the national picture. In his recent paper "Prospects for Prices", the director general said that customers in the south-west should expect a 15 to 20 per cent. reduction in 2000.

I apologise to hon. Members who raised points that I do not have time to deal with—I am sure that those points will be adequately covered in Committee.

The Bill envisages a new framework for the water industry in Scotland and new provisions for England and Wales. I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

WATER INDUSTRY BILL [MONEY]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Water Industry Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of any increase attributable to the Act in the sums so payable under any other Act.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

GOVERNMENT TRADING FUNDS

That the draft Forensic Science Service Trading Fund Order 1998, which was laid before this House on 5th November, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.

POLICE

That the draft Functions of Traffic Wardens (Scotland) Order 1998, which was laid before this House on 5th November, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.

INCOME TAX

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Ireland) Order 1998 be made in the form of the draft laid before this House on 9th November, in the last session of Parliament.

BROADCASTING

That the draft Broadcasting (Restrictions on the Holding of Licences) (Amendment) Order 1998, which was laid before this House on 11th November, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.

NORTHERN IRELAND

That the draft Rates (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, which was laid before this House on 12th November, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.

VALUE ADDED TAX

That the Value Added Tax (Input Tax) (Amendment) Order 1998 (S.I., 1998, No. 2767), dated 12th November 1998, a copy of which was laid before this House on 12th November, in the last session of Parliament, be approved.—*[Mr. Allen.]*

Question agreed to.

NORTHERN IRELAND GRAND COMMITTEE

Resolved,

That—

i. the matter of the Comprehensive Spending Review in Northern Ireland, being a matter relating exclusively to Northern Ireland, be referred to the Northern Ireland Grand Committee for its consideration; and

ii. at the sitting on Thursday 10th December:

(a) the Committee shall consider the matter referred to it in paragraph (i) above; and

(b) a Motion for the adjournment of the Committee may be made by a Minister of the Crown pursuant to Standing Order No. 116(5).—*[Mr. Allen.]*

ACCOMMODATION AND WORKS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Janet Anderson and Mr. George Mudie be discharged from the Accommodation and Works Committee and Mr. Keith Bradley and Mr. David Jamieson be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

CATERING COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Jackie Ballard be discharged from the Catering Committee and Mr. Paul Keetch be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mrs. Theresa May be discharged from the Education and Employment Committee and Mr. John Hayes be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. McWilliam, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

PETITIONS

Health Services (Berkshire)

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I wish to present a petition, signed by 1,425 people of Slough, which states:

The Petition of citizens of Slough declares that the cuts in community health services planned by the Berkshire Health Authority will damage the health of the people of this town.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Health to stop the cuts and require the health authority to work to improve the health of the people of Slough.

To lie upon the Table.

Electricity Pylons (Vale of York)

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): With permission, I would like to submit a petition from constituents in the Vale of York, expressing their protest against the proposed pylons across the North Yorkshire countryside. The petition has attracted 1,128 signatures and addresses specifically health and other risks. I hope that the petition will convince Ministers of the need to research the health effects of emissions from overhead power lines on people living nearby. The petitioners declare

that we object to the decision to allow electricity pylons to be erected in the constituency, and fear that they might be dangerous to our health.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Health to commission government research into the health effects of emissions from overhead power lines on those living nearby.

To lie upon the Table.

Community Health Care (Berkshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

10.2 pm

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): I requested this debate because of the series of cuts in community health services that were proposed by Berkshire health authority, which is responsible for health care across the area of the former Berkshire county council. As the House has heard, that has caused deep concern to more than 1,000 of my constituents who signed a petition on the subject which I have just submitted. I am glad, therefore, that since I requested the debate, Berkshire health authority has made significant changes to its proposals.

For many years, our county has been an area of major population growth, and only recently has health funding started to follow the people. Historically, Berkshire health authority has been underfunded in terms of the needs of the local population. Out of 100 health authorities, Berkshire comes 96th in spending per head, getting some £100 a head less than most health authorities.

The Labour Government have taken some initial steps towards rectifying that. I am glad to say that in both of the past two years, Berkshire has received among the highest percentage increases in health spending in England. Nevertheless, there is still an underlying deficit, and local health services remain very much under pressure.

Berkshire has an image of green prosperity, but the image is incomplete. The prosperity, and the good health that it brings, is not universal. Within Berkshire, the town that I represent, Slough, has the greatest deprivation. It also has the highest incidence of coronary heart disease in Berkshire. We are among the top 50 local authorities in the country for deaths of people under 65 from coronary heart disease—coming just between Birmingham and Newcastle-upon-Tyne—and among the top 10 for people of all ages, coming between Carlisle and Hackney. We have a worse record in terms of coronary heart disease—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. What is that noise?

Fiona Mactaggart: I believe that I am responsible, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: The hon. Lady should know that she should not have that device on in the Chamber.

Fiona Mactaggart: I know that, Madam Speaker, and I sincerely apologise. I do not understand why it is doing that.

Madam Speaker: Leave it outside.

Fiona Mactaggart: We have a worse record on coronary heart disease than not only other districts in Berkshire but neighbouring London boroughs such as Hillingdon, Hounslow and Ealing. We have the highest incidence of lung cancer, bowel cancer and pneumonia in Berkshire, and the most hospital admissions for all the top five causes of death.

"Our Healthier Nation" pledged to improve the health of the worst-off and to narrow the health gap. The pledge to tackle health inequalities was very important to Slough, as to other areas with a health record substantially worse than the national average.

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Fiona Mactaggart: Certainly.

Mr. Salter *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. Is the Minister aware that there is to be an intervention? The Chair has not been informed.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): I have no objection.

Mr. Salter: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in some aspects of the review and in the lamentable episode of attempting to make cuts in community health services in Berkshire, the health authority failed to take account not only of the White Paper on the national health service but of the recent policy document "Supporting Our Families", which envisaged an enhanced role for health visitors? Is it not important for Ministers to impress on health authorities the need to produce policies in line with Government health policies?

Fiona Mactaggart: Absolutely. "Our Healthier Nation" talked about councils and health authorities working together, but it is striking that that has not been achieved. Pioneering work is being done in my local authority to introduce early years centres, very much along the lines of the surestart initiative, and that will be damaged by the review proposals to reduce the number of health visitors.

The national priorities guidance asks local authorities, the Department of Social Security and health authorities to work together for child welfare; the Home Secretary's document on supporting families, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) has referred, proposed a greatly enhanced role for health visitors; and the conclusions of the Acheson report on health inequalities also have significant implications for Government policy that do not seem to have been seriously considered in Berkshire health authority's proposals.

The proposed cuts included £140,000 off the health visitors service—5.7 per cent. of its budget—which would have meant that it was unable to support the council's early years initiatives; and £40,000 from the speech and language therapy service, which was already under enormous pressure.

A consultant paediatrician told me of a five-year-old child of one of my constituents who had already waited a year and a half for speech and language therapy. The child does not have generalised developmental delay but has a specific speech and language therapy need that was not met in the pre-school years. Those are lost years for the child's education.

[Fiona Mactaggart]

The proposals for cuts were called service reviews but, frankly, they were attempts to reach financial targets and did not reflect the serious thinking about service needs and future health provision that a community with as many health problems as Slough requires.

The health authority was surprised by the strength of popular opposition to its proposals. That is partly because the debate about health care has focused on waiting lists and not necessarily on community services. I believe that the reaction showed that local people really care about their community services.

I heard from many people who were concerned about the role of their health visitors. For example, one of my constituents wrote:

"Being first-time parents, the health visitor was a source of help and reassurance and we found her invaluable."

That comment sums up the many representations that I received from parents about the support that they had from health visitors.

The proposals caused concern among the people of our community and its Members of Parliament. We had meetings with Ministers—I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading, East (Jane Griffiths), who initiated a meeting—at which we had positive responses. It seemed illogical to us that during the process a substantial increase of £29.6 million was allocated to the authority, yet those cuts-led proposals were still being pursued.

Following the meeting with the Minister, the situation began to change almost day by day. I am glad to say that the health authority withdrew the bulk of its proposals last Monday and promised further reviews of health visiting and school nursing—affecting cuts that had been proposed in the west of the county, but not Slough—including consulting the local councils and leaving out the savings targets. I thank my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health and her colleagues for that outcome and I hope that the health authority can move on and seek, as the petition that I presented earlier requested, to work instead to improve the health of the people of Slough.

I have to say that it is a crazy way to run a railroad. The health authority, if it is accountable to anyone, is accountable to the body that appoints it—the Government. It has no separate lines of accountability to local communities. Indeed, that is one of the weaknesses of our local health authority, which does not have members with long experience as councillors playing a large role on it. I do not understand how the local health authority can carry on making proposals that run directly counter to the priorities set out by the Government in several different documents and that have to be hauled back from the brink by the intervention of Members of Parliament and the outrage of the people for whose health care the authority is responsible.

A number of questions must be considered. First, I hope that the Minister will assure me that Berkshire health authority will not try to slide some of the cuts in under the wire, because the final version of its decision is not explicitly available to all of us. We do not know exactly what it plans to do. We know that it has withdrawn the present reviews, but it is not clear whether my local community trust will be expected to make the same savings on health visitors and speech and language therapists as were envisaged in the original proposals.

Secondly, when health authorities plan changes to our services, have they been directed to take account of the Government's policies, as outlined in "Our Healthier Nation", "National Priorities Guidance" and "Supporting Families"? Thirdly, if we are going to join up work in health and social services, I urge the Government to consider giving local councils a formal role in the national health service consultative process, perhaps putting them on a par with community health councils, at least in places where such co-operation has not taken place. Finally, in respect of Berkshire health authority, will the Minister outline what steps are being taken—through the Anglia and Oxford NHS region or otherwise—to ensure that the health authority's future actions conform to Government health policy and address the real health care needs of local people?

If we consider the figures, we can see that the town I represent has a health care crisis. The health authority has, so far, demonstrated an absolute inability to tackle it. The Government's published policies create a model through which we could tackle the crisis, but I want to know how we can deliver that model in practice in our community.

10.14 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): First, I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Fiona Mactaggart) on securing time for this important debate, on the way in which she presented her arguments and on the tenacity with which she has represented her constituents' interests in this matter in the House.

My hon. Friend asked four direct questions, and I shall answer each in turn. First, health authorities are given explicit guidance that changes to services must fully reflect Government policy. Regional offices of the national health service will approve an authority's service and financial framework and the health improvement programmes only if those requirements are fully met. That covers my hon. Friend's point about national priorities guidance, which, as she will be aware, applies also to social services departments.

Secondly, health authorities are expected to consult representatives of local councils, together with other groups such as users and carers. That responsibility is set to increase with the introduction of health improvement programmes from next year, when local authorities will play a crucial part in working more closely with the NHS and delivering better services to local people.

Thirdly, the roles of community health councils and local authorities are different, but both exercise considerable influence. CHCs have a unique role in the health service, representing the public interest. Local authorities have a key role in health improvement programmes, as they will be co-signatories, so co-operation will have to take place. As my hon. Friend knows, social services departments will be represented on the new primary care groups. In future, local authority chief executives will also attend health authority meetings.

My hon. Friend asked some questions about Berkshire, which I will explain more fully during my speech. Briefly, it may be worth reminding her that officials from the regional office met the health authority and emphasised the need to ensure that any proposals were fully compliant with Government policy. That involvement will continue into the new year, as the health authority devises its new strategy for families and children.

My hon. Friend mentioned community services, which have a key role to play in the NHS. The Government have made it clear that they expect to see that role develop. Those services are often undervalued, but they cover a vital link between acute services, primary care and patients.

A whole of host of community services are valued by the patients who rely on them. However, as with other health services, it is important continually to review community health care to take account of modern clinical practice. Health authorities must ensure that the services they provide are focused on the patients who most need support, while making sure they make the best use of resources.

The major public health agenda set out by the Government is contained in the Green Paper "Our Healthier Nation", together with the Home Office's "supporting families" initiative. Both have important implications for nurses, midwives, health visitors and other key staff working in the community health sector.

Our White Paper "The new NHS: modern, dependable" established significant changes in the way in which services will be organised. In particular, the development of primary care groups will play a key role in the way community health services are provided in the future. Those groups will also bring a local dimension to how services are best delivered, and will ensure that they reach the people who really need them.

Against that background, Berkshire health authority embarked on a review of community services in both the east and west of the county. Many of those services had not been reviewed for some time, and the health authority was committed to a programme of modernising the services it commissioned for Berkshire patients.

Following the review, but before any changes were made, Berkshire health authority carried out a consultation exercise, which was completed on November 16. Since then, there has been an intensive round of meetings with interested parties, including the two community health councils and the six unitary authorities. Of course, it is to be welcomed when a health authority works closely with its community health councils and listens to the views of local people, to achieve a consensus on how services should be delivered locally.

At the meeting between my hon. Friends and my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State in another place, it was agreed that the regional nursing director and the director of performance from the Anglia and Oxford regional office of the NHS should advise the health authority on the best way forward.

The role of the regional office was to ensure that the health authority was fully aware of Government policy and its implications for services in Berkshire. As I said in response to my hon. Friend's direct question, that involvement continues today.

At its board meeting last Monday, the health authority announced that it would substantially reconsider the proposals for health visitors, school nursing, and speech and language therapy services. The decision was taken after listening to the views and concerns of the public, local authorities and the two community health councils, and having considered the advice of the regional office. I know that the health authority, in deciding the next stages in its strategy, has also been mindful of the recent letter about community services to regional chairmen from my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health.

Although some aspects of the proposals have faced opposition, the proposed changes to community dentistry and podiatry have been broadly supported by the two CHCs. The changes to community dentistry would enable the service to care for the neediest patients. The podiatry service would be focused on patients suffering from diabetes, so that they get the help that they need.

The main question for hon. Members and their constituents is where we go from here. Now that the health authority has decided on this new approach, what will it mean for the people of Berkshire? The aim must be to target resources effectively, while meeting the aspirations of local people and fully reflecting Government policy.

For health visiting, school nursing and speech and language therapy, any proposals will now take in the wider perspective of the health and social needs of children and families, particularly those who are most vulnerable. I am sure that those children are among the main concerns of my hon. Friend. That will mean developing a joint strategy focused on children and families, and then devising a range of health, social and educational services to meet those needs. The health authority will involve staff and local authorities in that process of change. That is in keeping with the national priorities guidance that we announced earlier in the autumn.

Such partnership working had already been identified in the White Paper when it highlighted the need for health improvement programmes, which will have an important role in promoting effective health services for local communities. As I have said, they will not be the responsibility only of health authorities. Social services will have a key role as well in having to ensure that the programmes' objectives are reflected in local plans covering community care and children's services. In reviewing its community services, it is crucial that Berkshire health authority links any review with the health improvement programme, and in particular works together with all six unitary authorities.

The Government's Green Paper "Our Healthier Nation" stressed the need to tackle fundamental inequalities, such as the fact that people on low incomes are ill more often and die sooner. That has been reinforced by the report of the independent inquiry into inequalities in health, which was published last month. The inquiry was commissioned by the Government, led by the former chief medical officer, Sir Donald Acheson, and made a number of recommendations directed specifically at the NHS.

Most notably, it stated that providing equitable access to effective care in relation to need should be a governing principle of all policies in the NHS. Priority should be given to the achievement of equity in the planning, intervention and delivery of services at every level of the NHS.

I know that Berkshire health authority is acutely aware of the problems of deprived areas in a predominantly affluent area. I immediately think of my hon. Friend's constituency of Slough, which has greater needs than much of the rest of Berkshire. I know that parts of it are among the most deprived 10 per cent. in England. I am glad to say that the health authority is now committed to targeting services on the people with the greatest need, and resources will be allocated locally using a formula to be developed with the help of all stakeholder groups and the CHCs.

[Mr. John Hutton]

Those are admirable concepts that the Government will always welcome, but the health authority has still to develop a strategy for children and family services and then put together detailed proposals. Any significant changes would then need to be consulted with and agreed by both CHCs. Should either object, the matter will have to be referred to Ministers for determination. In those circumstances, we will need to be fully satisfied that any changes will improve the delivery of local NHS services in Berkshire.

My hon. Friend raised the issue of funding for the national health service in Berkshire. The Government are well aware of the concerns that the health authority has about funding, but Berkshire has done well under the Labour Government: for the next financial year, it will receive the highest allocation in the Anglia and Oxford region—£431 million. It will also receive the greatest increase in the region, of nearly £30 million—a real-terms increase of almost 5 per cent.

The health authority has also benefited from the Government's determination to reduce high waiting lists, and it has received further funding to tackle that inheritance from the previous Administration. The health authority was given £1.8 million to deal with the 1997–98 winter pressures, nearly £4 million of the waiting list additional funding and a further £871,000 to tackle waiting lists this financial year. That all adds up to a great deal of extra money to help to treat more patients in Berkshire. Clearly, some of that money will be spent on providing community services.

The current challenge for Berkshire health authority is to find a way forward in its community services that fully reflects true partnership with other agencies. As I have said, should the matter fail to win the approval of either of the community health councils, it will come before Ministers, who will be mindful of the Government's commitment to supporting the family, and to targeting social exclusion and inequalities in health. I assure my hon. Friend that those are crucial parts of the Government's commitment to improve health. We shall expect them to be properly reflected in any proposals that come from Berkshire health authority.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-six minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Tuesday 8 December 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

MESSAGE FROM THE QUEEN

QUEEN'S SPEECH (ANSWER TO ADDRESS)

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD reported Her Majesty's Answer to the Address, as follows:

I have received with great satisfaction the loyal and dutiful expression of your thanks for the Speech with which I opened the present Session of Parliament.

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Tax-varying Powers

1. **Mr. Graham Brady** (Altrincham and Sale, West): If he will make a statement about the technical measures to allow tax–varying powers to be introduced in Scotland. [61263]

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office (Mr. Henry McLeish): The Government are working to ensure that the tax-varying power will be fully in place and available for use by the Scottish Parliament from April 2000. The Inland Revenue has consulted widely and is continuing to work with a group of industry representatives on the measures required for implementation of the Scottish variable rate.

Mr. Brady: I thank the Minister for that reply. It will obviously be an expensive and inefficient process to administer a Scottish tax. The Government claim to be opposing vigorously proposals in Europe to harmonise taxes with the United Kingdom, on the grounds that such harmonisation would be bad for the United Kingdom. Will the Minister confirm that it would also be bad for Scotland if its tax levels were higher than England's?

Mr. McLeish: The Scotland Act 1998 has been premised on the basis that we want to provide a level playing field across the United Kingdom in the regulatory powers affecting industry. Moreover, I remind the hon. Gentleman that, on 11 September 1997, the Scottish people decided that they would like the Scottish Parliament to have power to vary the basic income tax rate. That power was endorsed by the Scottish people, and we are in the process of implementing our commitment on it. We believe that it is right for the Parliament to have such a power, and it will be up to the Parliament and the parties in it to decide whether to use it.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): I do not think that my hon. Friend needs to take any lectures on expensive and ineffective taxation from those who gave the poll tax to Scotland. May I try asking my hon. Friend a hypothetical question? If he were minded to set up a Scottish army, Scottish navy and Scottish air force, and to establish Scottish embassies around the world, does he think that he would be able to do so from revenue of threepence on income tax?

Mr. McLeish: I shall resist the temptation to go down that particular road. However, I think that the House might be interested to know that the Labour party has ruled out use of the tax when we are elected to Holyrood, whereas the Scottish National party is still dithering and confused about whether it might use it. Suffice it to say that, in a recent weekly publication, the SNP suggested that if it did not use the Scottish variable rate, it might want to consider

"purging quangos and taking a closer look at . . . Scotland's enterprise network to find extra resources."

The real challenge is for the nationalists to come clean on the Scottish variable rate.

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): Will the Minister of State confirm that the tax-varying powers, if used in full, amount to £450 million? Will he confirm also that further sums should be within the Scottish Parliament's direction, but that, according to media reports today, United Kingdom Departments are trying to find ways of not informing the Scottish Parliament about those funds? Will he say what action the Scottish Department has taken to ensure that the Scottish Parliament will not be short-changed, and that the concordats will be honoured in both spirit and letter?

Mr. McLeish: It has always been the case, and always will be the case, that we will get what we are entitled to. There is no plot to snatch back funds from the Scottish Administration.

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): Is not a vote in favour of a tax increase by the Members of the Scottish Parliament currently the most important technical provision allowing a tax increase in Scotland? Does my hon. Friend agree that, although such a vote would grab headlines in Scotland, it might not do the same elsewhere in the United Kingdom? Does not that fact make the case for a separate Scottish "Six O'Clock News" programme broadcast and controlled from Scotland, and underline the boneheadedness of those in the BBC who are trying to prevent such a separate Scottish broadcast?

Mr. McLeish: I am, yet again, being tempted down another road, which I shall again resist. On the important issue of taxation, suffice it to say that the Scottish people endorsed the measure on 11 September, and that we have been working very hard with the Inland Revenue and the business community to ensure that it is a success. Regulations will in the near future be laid before the House, putting the flesh on the bones of the measure.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): The Minister of State will undoubtedly be aware of Scottish Life's estimates of

the compliance costs—£170 million—of the tartan tax, regardless of whether it is used. Will the Minister tell us what discussions he and other Ministers have had with the Inland Revenue on compliance costs, and on who will pay the required sum? Will it be paid out of the Scottish block or by United Kingdom taxpayers as a whole?

Mr. McLeish: Throughout the process of discussing the Scottish variable rate and other matters in the Scotland Act 1998, we have been in close consultation with the Inland Revenue and with the business community. Of course we have also dealt at length with the assurance industry. We are working with a consultative group of industry representatives on formal compliance cost assessments for future publication, and we are fully aware of the concerns that have been expressed by the life assurance industry. It is one area in which dialogue has met with success.

We are convinced that we shall have the Scottish variable rate power available from April 2000, which is what matters to Scots. I can reassure every hon. Member that it will be done in an efficient way, to ensure a value-for-money approach at all times.

Dr. Fox: That was an answer that we can chew over in *Hansard* to see whether we are any the wiser. Does the Minister agree that the real danger is that of backdoor taxes, with different groups competing to spend Scottish taxpayers' money? Keith Geddes, the president of the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities, suggested a bed tax on tourists, Lord Steel suggested a caravan tax for visitors and Scottish Natural Heritage has suggested a sightseeing tax around Loch Lomond. Will the Minister give a commitment on behalf of the Labour party to rule out not only the use of the tartan tax, but an increase in the overall burden of tax on the Scottish people via the Scottish Parliament?

Mr. McLeish: Those concerns were brought to the House early in the debate on the Scotland Bill. It is now an Act, published on 19 November, but the Conservatives appear to have learnt little. The power exists to vary the Scottish basic rate of income tax. We think that that coincides with the wishes of the Scottish people and with the wish of the business community not to be inundated with new taxes. That will be the settlement for the Scottish Parliament. We shall have it in place by April 2000.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): Will my hon. Friend remind the Tory party that the people of Scotland voted in the referendum just last year for a Scottish Parliament with the power to vary tax? Does he agree that there is a strong case for the future development of fiscal autonomy for the Scottish Parliament, to give its Members the responsibility for raising the money that they want to spend on important services such as the national health service and education, instead of being dependent on decisions taken by the United Kingdom Government or votes in this House?

Mr. McLeish: My hon. Friend is right to point out that the Scottish people have endorsed the Scottish variable rate—it is important to underline that. It is also important to stress that the use of the variable rate is a power available to the Parliament. Any party can stand on a manifesto to raise that money and spend it. The Labour party has decided not to stand on such a policy. I challenge the nationalists to come clean and say whether they would use the Scottish variable rate. If not, what other sources of funding would they have?

Economic Development

2. **Mr. Andrew Lansley** (South Cambridgeshire): When he next intends to meet representatives of Scottish Enterprise to discuss economic development. [61264]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Donald Dewar): My colleagues and I regularly meet Scottish Enterprise, which plays an important part in the Government's proposals to modernise the Scottish economy. The most recent meeting was between my noble Friend the Minister for business and industry and the chairman and executives of Scottish Enterprise on 4 December.

Following assurances given to the Select Committee on Scottish Affairs, my strategy guidance to Scottish Enterprise entitled "Renewal and Enterprise" is being published today, and a copy has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that reply. When he next meets Scottish Enterprise, will he acknowledge that, with unemployment rising in Scotland, 12,000 job losses announced this year and business surveys increasingly showing falling order books in Scotland, he and his colleagues, particularly the Chancellor of the Exchequer, have left Scottish Enterprise ill equipped to respond to the impact of the Government's macro-economic policies?

Mr. Dewar: I shall start at the bottom—that is probably appropriate when dealing with the hon. Gentleman's questions. The budget for Scottish Enterprise is more than £440 million this year. It is adjusted, but remains substantially above £400 million. The reasons are that Hyundai did not come on stream, we are spending £70 million through the new deal on training and we decided, with the agreement of Scottish Enterprise, that it should spend less on property and more on its mainstream activities.

On the Scottish economy, the hon. Gentleman could not be more wrong. Of course none of us knows what the future holds, but he will know that the unemployment claimant count is at its lowest since 1977, that last month's unemployment figures again showed a drop in Scotland and that, looking at not just the bad news headlines but the good news headlines about the creation of jobs, there is a significant balance in Scotland's favour.

Ms Sandra Osborne (Ayr): May I take this opportunity to express the gratitude of the people of Ayrshire to my right hon. Friend and his colleagues for their response to the ending of Jetstream 41 production at Prestwick, which was to set up the Prestwick task force? As a member of that task force, I am aware that the report to be published shortly will show that substantially more jobs have been created than were originally lost. Does my right hon. Friend agree that such partnership working sets a good example for elsewhere?

Mr. Dewar: Yes. I thank everybody, including my hon. Friend, who served on the Prestwick task force. It has been a success. I am also grateful to the firms that took the opportunity presented by the site at Prestwick. It is now a hub of activity and I am sure that it will grow and prosper in future. My hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) had a similar experience with the closure of Mitsubishi at Haddington, where energetic local action, using local talent, skills and advantages, did much to redress the balance.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): When the Secretary of State next meets Scottish Enterprise, will he continue to discuss the particular difficulties being faced in south-east Scotland owing to the recent spate of redundancies? Is he aware that there is high expectation in the borders that when the Scottish Office working party reports in the next few days it will provide adequate additional resources to make a significant difference to those difficulties? In particular, will he make sure that any projects to expand employment in existing local businesses arising through the Scottish Enterprise network will not be knocked back by central Government because of a lack of funds?

Mr. Dewar: We have made it very clear that good, viable projects will be encouraged in every way. That applies across Scotland, but we are particularly aware of the difficulties in the south of Scotland and in the hon. Gentleman's constituency. We cannot offer the prospect of immediate success in solving all the problems, but there are a number of encouraging factors.

There is a very good spirit of co-operation in the area and we have every intention of continuing to work closely with local interests. Some of the matters that were raised with me when I was there have been dealt with in another way and in another forum. For example, the recent settlement of some of the immediate anxieties of the farming industry has been widely welcomed in the south of Scotland.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): My right hon. Friend will forgive me for being parochial, but when he next meets representatives of Scottish Enterprise will he urge upon them the need to assist the further development of the waterfront at Port Glasgow—not in my patch—Greenock and Gourock? The Government also need to assist with the proposal by Clyde ports for the development of a passenger ferry terminal at Port Glasgow. It makes excellent sense and would provide lots of jobs on the lower Clyde.

Mr. Dewar: I of course appreciate the importance of the issue that my hon. Friend raises. There has been a great deal of work and a great deal of success has been achieved. There have also been disappointments, such as the unfortunate closure of National Semiconductors, but new jobs have also been created, for example at IBM, on a very extensive scale. Again there is a balance to be struck. I am aware of the particular project to which my hon. Friend referred at the end of his question; it is something that we will watch very carefully.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Is not the truth of the matter that job losses are on the increase in too many parts of Scotland? While the Secretary of State concentrates on trying to get another job for himself—a prospect that is fading faster after the north-east Euro by-election—others are losing their jobs. With high interest rates compared with the rest of Europe, too strong a pound hitting exports, and high on-costs on wages even before the minimum wage starts pushing unemployment even higher, is the only hope for those losing their jobs due to Government policy to follow the lead of the Paymaster General and advertise their availability for hire in the "Yellow Pages"?

Mr. Dewar: I suppose that the hon. Gentleman is trying to add to his reputation as a statesman. Obviously he was not listening or decided to ignore what I said earlier. If we compare the job losses that have been announced since the beginning of the year and the job promises that have been made—I recognise that promises do not always turn into reality—and even if the promises are only two thirds fulfilled, it is clear that we are in balance.

Unemployment in Scotland has been falling steadily. I shall not attempt to predict the future because there is a world crisis and a contagion of fear in the international market—we cannot be totally immune from that—but we have a stable economy as a result of two years of tough but necessary decision making by my colleagues in the Treasury. We are thus in a good position to ride out the problems, and the figures remain encouraging.

Further Education

3. **Mrs. Maria Fyfe** (Glasgow, Maryhill): What plans he has to review the organisation and management of further education, with particular reference to industrial relations issues. [61265]

The Minister for Education, Scottish Office (Mrs. Helen Liddell): The Government have asked the further education sector to play a leading role in the delivery of our key programmes for education, social inclusion and competitiveness and we are increasing expenditure in the sector by £214 million over the next three years. To ensure that that money meets the challenges that the Government have set the sector, I intend to ask the new Scottish Further Education Funding Council to review the management of further education colleges. I will announce a detailed remit for the review shortly.

Mrs. Fyfe: That is excellent news which will be widely welcomed. Will my right hon. Friend say whether, as part of the review, the restoration of the national negotiating machinery will be considered? That machinery was taken apart by the previous Government, despite the fact that they were warned about the likely consequences in places such as Motherwell college. Responsible and experienced trade unionists, who knew what they were talking about, told the then Government what the results would be, but their views were ignored.

Mrs. Liddell: I take my hon. Friend's point about bargaining in further education colleges. There is a mixed message across Scotland about the impact of localised bargaining, but I have no doubt that the review board will consider the matter and come to conclusions on it. As she knows, I have no specific locus in industrial relations

matters, but I recently visited Motherwell college, where I asked both management and the trade unions to resolve their difficulties as quickly as possible. The only people who suffer in such situations are the students, who are all working extremely hard.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Does the right hon. Lady see any problems with the difference between the supposed increases in expenditure on school teachers and the salaries available to people in further education? The Government have clearly tried to accelerate the amount of funding per pupil in schools, but the same is not true of further education.

Mrs. Liddell: I really wish the Opposition Whips would brief Conservative Members better. If the hon. Gentleman had listened more closely, he would have heard me say that £214 million extra was going into further education over the next three years. Further education is at the heart of the Government's plans for lifelong learning, and we are greatly encouraged by the breadth of experience of lecturers in further education colleges and the role that they are playing in meeting the Government's challenges.

Mrs. Irene Adams (Paisley, North): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on the review of further education colleges, especially because of the difficulties that we have had in Renfrewshire with Reid Kerr college in my constituency. Will she ask the review board to consider how the new deal is working in further education colleges? I have heard complaints that new dealers have been turned away in favour of more lucrative students.

Mrs. Liddell: That is an interesting question—I know that my hon. Friend is concerned about the matter. We have invited consultants to look at the operation of Reid Kerr college. We have made it plain to the further education sector that it has a responsibility to its conventional students as well as to those students who have come in under the new deal. I hope shortly to publish the strategic framework for further education, which will take into account some of the structural issues that are causing colleges to compete perhaps needlessly.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): In view of the dissatisfaction with local pay bargaining in further education to which the hon. Member for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe) referred, will the right hon. Lady undertake not to introduce similar arrangements in secondary education?

Mrs. Liddell: The millennium review completed its discussions on salary levels in our schools a short time ago. The review is currently negotiating the role of local authorities as employers with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. I am hopeful that, at the end of that process, there will be a settlement for Scotland's teachers that rewards all teachers in a way that recognises their talents. At the moment, there are no proposals on the table for the introduction of localised bargaining.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Will the Minister accept that the £2 million real-terms cut in funding for the three north-east colleges of further education has placed a real question mark over the Government's commitment to "education, education, education"? Does she acknowledge that the cut has led to sudden, abrupt changes in timetables, which are deeply damaging to the students and cause great unhappiness to the lecturers, who are not even consulted in advance?

Mrs. Liddell: As the hon. Gentleman is no doubt aware, we inherited a £5 million public expenditure cut in further education colleges. This year alone, we have increased expenditure by £12.4 million. Early in the new year, I will announce the settlements for colleges, including those in the north. The Government have shown our commitment to further education by giving it the place in the education system that it deserves, and by increasing expenditure on further education across Scotland.

Local Government Reform

4. **Mr. Robert Syms** (Poole): If he will make a statement regarding the reform of local government. [61266]

The Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution, Scottish Office (Mr. Henry McLeish): The Government are working to ensure that we create modernised local government, delivering the services people need. We appointed the Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament under the chairmanship of Neil McIntosh; it will report to the First Minister in due course.

Mr. Syms: Does the Minister think that the McIntosh commission on local authorities has missed an opportunity by not recommending an anti-corruption commission to look into allegations of wrongdoing in the central belt?

Mr. McLeish: The reason why we did not ask the McIntosh commission to look at that matter is that we are looking at it ourselves. Next week, we will issue a new code of conduct for councillors, which will be part of the question of ethical standards in local government. There will be standards committees for councils, and a standards commission for Scotland, to provide a means of dealing with allegations of misconduct external to the council involved. We have acknowledged that there is a difficulty and we have taken steps to remedy it. We will publish our findings next week, and the Scottish Parliament will legislate.

Mrs. Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): Does my hon. Friend agree that the root cause of the problems in Scottish local government lies directly with the Conservative party and its botched and expensive reorganisation, which removed from local government a vast number of experienced officers? Is not the bottom line the fact that the Scottish Parliament will work with local authorities to provide the high-quality, modernised services that the people of Scotland desperately need?

Mr. McLeish: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. For 18 years, local government was neglected and abused. In the past 18 months, we have had an opportunity to tackle problems where they have arisen, but we must go ahead in partnership. I have no doubt that the new Parliament will ensure that local authorities retain their autonomy. We will make sure that standards are improved and that services are modernised. Where it is required, we will rebuild public trust and

confidence. That is an important agenda for the new century—an agenda that it would be impossible to achieve under the Conservative party.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Self-regulation by the Labour party in Scotland scarcely fills us with confidence. The Labour party cannot be the solution, because it is the problem. Perhaps the Minister can refresh our memories. How many investigations are currently taking place into misdemeanours in Labour-run councils? Strathclyde regional council last week found that it was leaving a deficit of £78 million for its successor councils to pay up. Was that old Labour, new sleaze or new Labour, old sleaze? How would the Minister describe his party's financial incompetence?

Mr. McLeish: It is clear again that the hon. Member for Woodspring (Dr. Fox), the Opposition's principal spokesman, has completely missed the point. No one is talking about self-regulation by the Labour party. We are talking about a new ethical framework which, I repeat, will comprise a code of conduct for councillors, standards committees for councils and an independent standards commission for Scotland to provide the means of dealing with allegations of misconduct. That will be the basis of an announcement, and the basis for parliamentary legislation in Holyrood. Dealing with the House of Lords may be a trifle easy, but dealing with Scottish local government requires the Opposition to be serious—which they have not been in the past 18 months.

Mr. Nigel Griffiths (Edinburgh, South): Does my hon. Friend realise how much the extra £860 million for local government will improve services, and how welcome it is in the schools in my constituency and elsewhere that an extra £1.3 billion is being spent on our education services over the next three years? That is 15 per cent. above inflation, and far more than was ever given by the Conservative Government.

Mr. McLeish: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments, because that is the reality of Scottish local government. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is investing heavily in the future of education. That is important to Labour Members, even if it is not important to Conservatives. We want to invest and modernise, and that requires partnership, which is what the new Parliament at Holyrood will provide.

Mental Health Care

5. **Mrs. Margaret Ewing** (Moray): When he last met representatives of health trusts in Scotland to discuss delivery of mental health care in Scotland. [61267]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Sam Galbraith): I meet representatives of health boards and NHS trusts regularly to discuss matters of current interest. Mental health is a top priority for the Government and we have already introduced a range of measures designed to improve services for the mentally ill. It is vital also that the legislative framework be adequate to meet developments in treatment and care, while having due regard to public safety, so we are setting up a committee to carry out a major review of the Mental Health (Scotland) Act 1984, which the right hon. Bruce Millan, I am pleased to announce, has agreed to lead.

Mrs. Ewing: I welcome the Minister's comments, but does he appreciate the fact that many of us will want time to study the recommendations that may be made in the review of that Act? This important issue affects many people in Scotland. Will there be nurse-led initiatives in both acute and primary care services, which are very important for everyone; and will the review exclude compulsory treatment, which is a matter on which the Scottish Association for Mental Health, for example, has expressed concern about civil liberties? How will the review be undertaken and when will the recommendations be implemented?

Mr. Galbraith: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's welcome for the review, but she must appreciate the fact that there are two separate issues involved: the legislation under which care is carried out, and the care itself. What I have announced today is a review of the legislation. It will be carried out under the chairmanship of the right hon. Bruce Millan, and we will make further announcements about the membership and remit of the review committee. We hope that it will report in 18 months' time.

Mr. Tom Clarke (Coatbridge and Chryston): Does my hon. Friend agree that there are almost exactly the same number of people with learning disabilities in hospitals in Scotland as there are in the whole of England and Wales? Does he further agree that, before such patients are discharged, there should be proper assessments and advocacy, in line with the Disabled Persons (Services, Consultation and Representation) Act 1986, so that we know what will happen to them? Does he, finally, agree that he has inherited a situation in which there are again more mentally ill people in Scottish prisons this Christmas, simply because the courts do not know where else to send them; and that that is incompatible with the caring attitude of the Scottish people?

Mr. Galbraith: I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's comments on a subject on which he is an expert. He is correct about the figures. There is always a balance to be struck between those in the community and those who are looked after in hospitals. We have not got it right yet, but we are moving in the right direction. I can give an absolute assurance that no person with learning difficulties will leave hospital unless going into care of a very high standard that will offer decency and dignity and the opportunity to live as normal a life as possible.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): How many mental health hospitals in Scotland still have mixed-sex wards?

Mr. Galbraith: I cannot give the exact figure. The difference between Scotland's mental health services and those in the rest of the country is that we did not rush into closing all our mental health hospitals and forcing all the patients into the community. We have retained a certain number in hospitals because we think that it is right and proper to provide places of refuge

and asylum. We will continue to do that. It is a question of getting the balance right, and we think that we are near to achieving that in Scotland.

Higher Still

6. **Mr. Michael Connarty** (Falkirk, East): If he will make a statement on the progress of the implementation of Higher Still. [61268]

The Minister for Education, Scottish Office (Mrs. Helen Liddell): Work is proceeding to ensure that Higher Still will be introduced from August 1999. The liaison group which I announced at Scottish questions in November has now met twice to consider issues relating to the implementation of Higher Still. I hope that the contribution of and positive approach taken by all members of the group will ensure that there is no need for any further delays with Higher Still.

Mr. Connarty: Is my right hon. Friend aware of the warm commendations that accompanied the applause after her recent speech to the Association of Directors of Education in Scotland? For her handling of the Higher Still debate, she is becoming known as Scottish education's "flexible friend," although I have suggested that her approach is more firm and flexible than just flexible. Does she accept that the Educational Institute of Scotland's survey of readiness reveals that, because of the cascade training method, many classroom teachers still feel unprepared to deal with Higher Still in the classroom? Will she make it plain to local authorities in Scotland that they should use some of the vast resources that she has made available to them to train teachers directly in the classroom in preparation for Higher Still?

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I know that he does so with some knowledge of the topic. With reference to the cascade methods used to disseminate training, it is difficult to see how cascading could be avoided entirely, given that tens of thousands of teachers and lecturers are involved in the process, but there should be only one cascade from the principal teacher to the classroom teacher.

I recognise the anxieties of teachers about their preparedness. That is why I have made an additional £24 million available, which makes a total of £40 million for the implementation of Higher Still. A number of local authorities have made available additional in-service training days for Higher Still, and the Government are making available resources for two additional in-service training days. My hon. Friend can be confident that teachers will not be forced to implement Higher Still if they feel that they cannot do so competently.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): Why will the Minister not listen to professional teachers who are trying to tell her that the element of internal assessment in the Higher Still system will inevitably mean that employers and higher education institutions will have doubts about the validity of exam results achieved by children under the Higher Still system?

Mrs. Liddell: The hon. Lady is misinformed. The structure of assessment that will operate in Higher Still is based on existing structures of assessment. She says that the Government have not listened. When English teachers felt that the level of assessment was one level too far, the Government undertook to amend the system of assessment available for the teaching of English, and we are now issuing new guidelines.

The hon. Lady is far from the mark when she suggests that employers are unhappy with Higher Still. As recently as four weeks ago, the Confederation of British Industry issued a statement calling for the rapid introduction of Higher Still, because Higher Still meets the needs of employers and is a route towards ensuring that Scottish education maintains and builds on its high standards.

Mr. Donald Gorrie (Edinburgh, West): As flexibility seems to be the key to getting agreement between the Scottish Office and the teachers, will the Minister elaborate on the reply that she gave a moment ago about the extent to which individual schools and departments will be able to go ahead or not, depending on how well prepared for Higher Still the teachers feel?

Mrs. Liddell: The liaison group was established to take that matter into account. There have been two meetings of the liaison group so far, and I am grateful for the hard work that has been done by the group. A third meeting of the liaison group is to take place next week, and it will examine the guidelines to local authorities and the parameters within which decisions are to be taken.

Universities (English Applicants)

7. **Mr. Tam Dalyell** (Linlithgow): What is his current estimate of the number of applications to Scottish universities from English-domiciled students for the years 1999–2000; and what was the number of applications in November 1997 for the academic year 1998–99. [61269]

The Minister for Education, Scottish Office (Mrs. Helen Liddell): Seven per cent. more English students have accepted places at Scottish universities this year than did last year, which gives the lie to the scaremongering that we heard some months ago. I expect the number of English applications to Scottish higher education institutions for next year to be maintained. We want to offer as many students as possible the opportunity to qualify for higher education in Scotland.

Mr. Dalyell: Will 9 per cent. of the population continue to gain 13 per cent. of the university places? Do not universities such as Heriot-Watt, Stirling and Aberdeen depend financially on the continuation of that position?

Mrs. Liddell: My hon. Friend is concerned following his discussions with representatives of those universities about the level of applications this year. However, we shall not have a detailed analysis of those applications until 15 December, when the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service cut-off date applies. I shall try to find out what impact there has been on specific disciplines, and the Government are committed to monitoring the introduction of new student support arrangements, which is why the Quigley committee has been established.

Mr. Jonathan Sayeed (Mid-Bedfordshire): What is the social profile of the students to whom the Minister referred? Will she publish the figures on 15 December so that we can determine whether the new students have rather well-off parents?

Mrs. Liddell: I am afraid that I must disappoint the hon. Gentleman, who is searching for gloom where none exists. Analysis by UCAS of the social classes of United Kingdom applicants suggests that the proportion from poorer backgrounds this year is similar to that last year. The scaremongering was all for nothing.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): Can the Minister say how many English students have applied to the university of the highlands and islands, and, in particular, to Argyll college? She will be aware that, although the college's prospectus is out, there is no funding with which to run the college, and that has put it in jeopardy in an area that has no further education facilities. Will she and her Department do something about that immediately?

Mrs. Liddell: I am slightly ahead of the hon. Lady, because I met representatives of Argyll college last week. I recognise the difficulties in Argyll, an area with no ready access to further education. I am anxious that Argyll should benefit from the university of the highlands and islands. I cannot give the hon. Lady statistics disaggregated for applications for higher education in Argyll, but I know of the strong academic record of Argyll—particularly at Dunoon grammar school, which has sent a high proportion of hon. Members to the House—and I look forward to a solid future for Argyll. My officials are giving what assistance they can to Argyll college, because it is important to put together a sustainable business case for the college's proposals on marine education. I am anxious to give the maximum support to ensure that Dunstaffnage puts together a viable case that will provide future stability.

Manufacturing

9. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): If he will make a statement on developments in the Scottish manufacturing sector. [61272]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): In the year to the second quarter of 1998, manufacturing output increased by 4.6 per cent., compared with the previous four quarters, and growth was evident in seven of the 11 manufacturing sectors.

Mr. Winterton: Are the Minister and the Labour Government concerned by the Office for National Statistics index of production, which showed manufacturing output in the three months to October falling by 0.7 per cent. and business failures in September rising by nearly 18 per cent? Do those figures result from the tax on savings, the increases in taxation and the increase in business costs that the Government have brought into effect.

Mr. Macdonald: As I would have predicted, the hon. Gentleman is being selective. As I have said, in the year to the second quarter of 1998, manufacturing output increased by 4.6 per cent. In the past month, there have been excellent announcements by various companies: Fullarton Computer Industries will create 500 new jobs in Prestwick; Universal Scientific Industries is creating 700 jobs at a new plant in Irvine; and Walter Alexander, the Falkirk coach builder, has won a £15 million contract from Hong Kong for 122 buses, which is commendable in a difficult export climate.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham (Perth): Will the Minister advise the House whether he thinks that the Scottish manufacturing sector will be adversely affected by an emergent Whitehall culture, which is demonstrated in a recent leaked memo stating that as little information as possible is to be given to the Scottish Parliament even in areas of devolved powers? Does he think that that grudging attitude is appropriate?

Mr. Macdonald: Manufacturing would, of course, be wrecked by the uncertainties caused by any move towards separation and independence. I must emphasise that there is no plot to snatch back funds from the Scottish Administration. Funds that are already with the Scottish Office will automatically transfer to the Scottish Parliament and the White Paper stated that Scotland would continue to benefit from its appropriate share of United Kingdom public expenditure.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

The Minister of State was asked—

Commonhold Tenure

28. **Mrs. Jacqui Lait** (Beckenham): When he expects to publish his proposals on commonhold property tenure. [61248]

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is consulting on proposals for leasehold reform. That consultation deals with issues similar to those that would have to be covered in consultation on a commonhold scheme. Therefore, it would be sensible to consider the results of the DETR exercise before embarking on our own consultation. Meanwhile, work on developing proposals is continuing.

Mrs. Lait: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that reply, but it would help those of us who are interested in leasehold reform if we could consider commonhold in parallel. In the past, he told us that some difficulties have emerged since the 1996 Bill was drafted in the Department. Can he tell us what problems remain on commonhold and whether he would accede to the suggestion that we consider commonhold along with leasehold reform, rather than afterwards?

Mr. Hoon: The reason it was decided not to proceed in parallel was that any proposal for a commonhold scheme would inevitably have to cover many areas on which the DETR is consulting on leasehold. For example, relations between individuals and their landlord—whether he or she is a freeholder or a commonhold association—relations between individuals, managers and agents,

valuation and dispute resolution processes and a number of other areas are common to both matters. It seems to us to make good sense to keep the systems in step in so far as we can to ensure that any benefits that result from leasehold reform are also available to commonholders. However, we are continuing with the preparatory work so that as soon as the consultation period on leasehold reform is completed we will be in a position to proceed with any further proposals on commonhold that may be necessary.

Justice (Local Administration)

29. **Mr. Barry Sheerman** (Huddersfield): What steps he is taking to improve the local delivery and administration of justice. [61252]

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): On the criminal side, our plans for developing the local delivery and administration of the magistrates courts service were announced in statements to both Houses on 29 October 1997. As a result, smaller magistrates courts committees are amalgamating, leading to an increase in administrative efficiency for the areas involved. On the civil side, the Court Service is responsible for ensuring an appropriate balance between the delivery of local justice and obtaining value for taxpayers' money. The Access to Justice Bill, which was introduced on 2 December, will continue our programme of reform.

Mr. Sheerman: My hon. Friend will know that I approve of, and congratulate him on, many of the things that the Department is doing. However, on local justice locally delivered, many of my constituents and many magistrates are concerned that the rationalisation that is still continuing apace in magistrates courts is very similar to that carried out under a previous Administration. The proximity of courts to everyday life and work is important, especially for people from impoverished backgrounds—those people who suffer from social exclusion—so that they can be in their community and get to court easily. Therefore, will my hon. Friend have a word with some of his civil servants? The proposal may look good on the map and may be good for rationalisation and efficiency as regards the taxpayer, but surely local justice should still be locally delivered.

Mr. Hoon: I do not disagree with the principles that my hon. Friend has set out. However, responsibility for local magistrates courts is in the hands of local magistrates courts committees. They decide whether courts should remain open or closed in the first place and it is only when there is an appeal against a decision that the Department becomes involved. Hon. Members who are concerned about the local delivery of justice should use their influence, as I hope that my hon. Friend will, on local magistrates courts committees to ensure that, where appropriate, courts remain open.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): May I ask the Minister to consider the importance of the county courts as part of the local community as well as part of the delivery of local justice? In particular, will he examine the proposals, which I understand are at an early stage, to close Altrincham, Tameside and Leigh county courts? That would be a retrograde step in the local delivery of justice and I hope that he will take a close look at it.

Mr. Hoon: I have visited Altrincham county court—in a wholly representative capacity, might I say. I was impressed by the service that it provided to the local community. It is crucial that the local court service can balance the interests of the taxpayer and the cost of county courts against the importance of the local delivery of justice. Most people who visit county courts go there for information; they do not necessarily go there to attend court. There are many ways in which information can be delivered using the benefits of modern technology other than through making available a courthouse facility. I hope that information technology will improve access to information, rather than leaving us dependent on expensive court buildings to deliver the service.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The Minister knows that I have been concerned for some time about the closure of magistrates courts in my constituency. I have seen him at least once on the subject, but he did not assist me much in terms of access to local justice then. It is not only the public—front-line access to justice—who are suffering; justices of the peace in north Wales have told me, fatalistically, that before long their lives will be so miserable that stipendiaries will come in and the whole system of local justice will go.

Mr. Hoon: I simply do not accept that. As I said, the administration of local justice and the magistrates courts is in the hands of local magistrates courts committees. That is the same in north Wales as in other parts of England and Wales. It will remain in their hands because that is the best way to guarantee the local delivery of justice.

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I am sure that the Minister agrees that, for local people to have confidence in their justice system, it is crucial that magistrates benches be properly representative of the communities that they serve. Unfortunately, that is not the case in Salford. Take three inner-city areas: in Ordsall we have no magistrates; in Langworthy and Seedley we have but one; and in Kersal we have a grand total of five. Such areas suffer the bulk of crime and disorder in our city. Will the Minister reassure me that steps are being taken to increase the number of inner-city representatives on our magistrates benches so that the communities that suffer crime are represented at the heart of the justice system?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question, although she will know that appointments in the Duchy of Lancaster are the responsibility of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster. Nevertheless, the Lord Chancellor has asked the Central Office of Information to devise a national press campaign to help identify ways of attracting groups who are under-represented on the bench. The Lord Chancellor's Department and the Magistrates Association have worked together to produce a guide for employers explaining the benefits to their companies of having magistrates in the work force. I sincerely hope that the appointments system will benefit from that approach.

Access to Justice Bill

31. **Mr. Dominic Grieve** (Beaconsfield): If he intends to publish a White Paper in advance of the Access to Justice Bill. [61254]

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): The Government published their White Paper "Modernising Justice" on 2 December 1998.

Mr. Grieve: I am obliged to the Minister for pointing out that which had already been brought to my attention. May I take him to the reference in paragraph 6.18 of the White Paper on whether salaried defenders will be sanctioned by the Government? He knows that that issue has caused much disquiet in the legal profession and that the White Paper suggests that it will be kept under consideration. Will he explain why clause 13 of the Access to Justice Bill, which was published simultaneously, provides that Parliament will be asked to sanction exactly such a step and will be deprived of the opportunity of legislative scrutiny thereafter?

Mr. Hoon: The explanation is that it is clearly necessary for the Government, subject to parliamentary approval, to have powers to employ salaried lawyers who may one day, if appropriate, constitute a public defender service. The Government have no plans to take forward any comprehensive scheme, but it is right that Parliament should have the opportunity to debate in principle whether that may one day become a feature of our criminal defence service.

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): Will my hon. Friend acknowledge the bewilderment that members of the public who have recourse to the law feel when they have dealt with a lawyer whom they trust and believe is competent to carry out their business and that lawyer is suddenly replaced in court by someone whom they have barely met and do not know? Will he emphasise to me the Government's commitment to ensuring that access to audience is seriously pursued?

Mr. Hoon: I am grateful for my hon. Friend's question. He will know that the Bill and the White Paper set out proposals to eliminate the remaining restrictive practices between solicitors and barristers to allow all those who have qualified as either a solicitor or a barrister to appear in all the higher courts. That is a welcome improvement in the rights of ordinary people to secure legal representation and will eliminate the problems that my hon. Friend so well describes.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): The Minister will recognise that the Access to Justice Bill will deny citizens the right to select a defence lawyer of their choice. How does that comply with the Human Rights Act 1998?

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Difficult, Geoffrey.

Mr. Hoon: Not at all.

The provisions that we have set out in the White Paper and the Bill will ensure that those who are represented under legal aid schemes paid for by taxpayers' money have access to specialist representation. We will contract with only those lawyers who are specialists in particular fields. For the moment, anyone who is eligible for legal aid can go to any lawyer, irrespective of whether that lawyer knows anything about the subject in hand. We will ensure through contracting that people still have a choice of lawyer, but they will have a choice of those lawyers who are qualified and experienced in the relevant field of practice. That is a considerable improvement on the present arrangements.

Mr. Gareth Thomas (Clwyd, West): Does my hon. Friend agree that, whatever the leader of the Bar may say, the majority of those of progressive opinion within the legal profession accept the need to modernise the profession, eliminate unnecessary restrictive practices and improve access to justice?

Mr. Hoon: I was slightly surprised to discover that members of the Bar welcomed our proposals. Although they had one or two "predictable moans", according to a leader in *The Times*, on balance they felt that our proposals would improve access to justice and would be to the benefit of all those citizens who have to use legal services.

Magistrates Courts (East Anglia)

32. **Mr. Andrew Lansley** (South Cambridgeshire): What representations he has received concerning the closure of magistrates courts in East Anglia. [61255]

The Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department (Mr. Geoffrey Hoon): I have recently received 12 representations from hon. Members, justices of the peace and other local interested parties, following the Cambridgeshire magistrates courts committee's determination to close the March magistrates courts with effect from 31 December 1998. I have previously received representations in relation to the Suffolk magistrates courts committee's decision to close magistrates courts in Suffolk.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful for that reply. Does the Minister agree that Haverhill in Suffolk is a good instance of a market town—it is in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring)—that is forecast to grow and should have local infrastructure, but that will see access to justice denied and the abandonment of an important part of the local infrastructure?

Mr. Hoon: I understand the hon. Gentleman's concern about Haverhill and other courthouses in Suffolk, but those decisions were taken by the Suffolk magistrates courts committee. It is curious that the hon. Gentleman should come here and make representations to a

London-based Minister that that Minister should override a local decision which surely was informed by all the factors that he advances on behalf of the case for Haverhill and other such towns.

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Does the Minister agree that every magistrates courts committee is a quango? Does he accept that those quangos are taking the decisions that they have taken, not at the behest of local people, but because the Government have starved the service of sufficient resources?

Mr. Hoon: I do not accept for one moment either that magistrates courts committees are quangos or that they are starved of financial resources.

Mental Health Services

3.30 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): I should like to make a statement on the Government's proposals to modernise the mental health services as part of our drive to ensure that we enter the new century and new millennium with health and social services that are modern and dependable.

Last year we published our proposals for radical reform of the national health service, and last week we did the same for social services. The strategy document we are publishing today brings together our proposals for far-reaching changes and improvements in the treatment and care which both services provide for people who are mentally ill. We are doing that to emphasise that mental health is not some marginal responsibility of the NHS and local social services—far from it: it must be at the heart of both. That is because mental health is not an obscure minority concern. It is just as important as physical illness and the two can be closely interlinked.

Mental illness is as common as asthma: it affects as many as one in six adults at any one time. It ranges from high levels of anxiety or deep depression to severe and enduring illnesses, such as schizophrenia, which affect one person in a hundred. Mental illness is extremely disturbing to sufferers and their families. It can leave people without insight into the consequences of their actions, which is very frightening; in addition, mental illness is little understood. Those factors combine so that mental illness carries a stigma. In turn, the stigma frightens sufferers and their families, and can lead to people postponing getting the treatment they need.

Partly because of that, mental illness does not get the prompt, effective and sympathetic attention it both deserves and needs. As a result, people who are mentally ill, their carers and the professional staff responsible for their welfare have suffered from ineffective practices, an outdated legal framework and lack of resources. We want to deal with all those aspects to bring about a dramatic change for the better in the treatment and care of all those who are mentally ill. In particular, we want to make sure that proper attention is given to the disturbing growth in the number of young people who are mentally ill, and to the particular needs of certain ethnic groups.

Most people who suffer mental illness are vulnerable people who pose no threat to anyone but themselves. Their condition may make it hard for them to keep a family together or hold down a job, but their behaviour is mild and inoffensive. Most of them are not getting all the low-intensity support they need. That is partly due to the fact that confidence in the whole system is in crisis, mainly because it is not coping with the small minority of mentally ill people who are a nuisance or a danger both to themselves and to others. That is where the policy of care in the community has failed: its failure to deal effectively with the most severe cases has dealt a blow to all mental health efforts and lost the confidence of the public.

Discharging people from hospitals brought benefits for some, but it has left many vulnerable people who find it difficult to cope. Others have become a danger to themselves and a nuisance to others. Too many have been left wandering the streets and sleeping rough, and a small but significant minority have become a danger to the public as well as to themselves. That cannot go on, so we are putting in place a new strategy to tackle the problems faced by patients, professionals and public alike. We have to take steps to tackle the most extreme manifestations of mental illness, because if we do not, the other people who are mentally ill will not get the attention they deserve and need.

That is why we must bring the law on mental health up to date. That law was formulated at a time when most mentally ill patients were treated in hospitals, so it now reflects the practices of a bygone age and must be modernised to cope with the problems of today. At present, some people who would once have been left locked up in a hospital are fine living in the community; others are only safe providing they take their medication. However, some of those who can become a danger to themselves and others refuse to comply with the treatment they need. That cannot be allowed to go on, which is why I have set up a review of the law on mental health. We need a law that works in a crisis, not one that fails in a crisis.

Similarly, there is a small group of people with an untreatable psychiatric disorder, which makes them dangerous. At present, neither law nor practice are geared to cope with them. They cannot be taken into a mental hospital if they will not respond to treatment, and they cannot be put in prison unless they have committed an offence. If they are sent to prison, they can be a danger upon their release. Therefore, the Home Secretary and I are considering proposals to create a new form of renewable detention for people with a severe personality disorder who are considered to pose a grave risk to the public.

That raises all sorts of ethical and practical problems, but we are convinced that the safety of the public must be the prime concern. People whose mental illness poses a threat to others constitute a very small minority, but we must be able to deal with them. Their illness is often an even bigger threat to them, and our new system should be better both for them and for the public.

Our mental health strategy goes much wider than that, and there are huge developments in both policy and practice. We will put in place a national service framework, which will spell out for every part of the country the range of services that are needed to treat and care for the mentally ill and how best to deliver them. We are being advised about that by an external reference group chaired by Professor Graham Thornicroft from the Maudsley hospital. I thank him and his colleagues for their work in that area.

In the meantime, we are getting on with the improvements that are unarguably needed. There is a pressing need in some parts of the country for more mental health beds and for 24-hour services to be available. We want the services that are provided to be safe, sound and supportive: safe to protect the public and the most vulnerable patients; sound to ensure that patients get the best and most appropriate care and attention; and supportive by working with the patients, users, carers and local communities to help mentally ill people live as independent lives as possible. The strategy works best when patients and carers are involved in shaping services to meet local needs.

Those services, which back up informal carers, will be provided by the national health service, social services and voluntary bodies. All must work together to ensure

[Mr. Frank Dobson]

that people who are mentally ill get well-organised and unified treatment. Proposals in the forthcoming national health service Bill and Local Government Bill will promote that policy.

This year, the planning guidance issued to the national health service was issued as joint guidance to the health service and social services to emphasise the need for them to work together. The National Institute for Clinical Excellence, which we shall establish, will issue clear and authoritative guidance on the most effective drugs and therapies for use in treating mental as well as physical illnesses.

At the same time that those general improvements are being made to the NHS, we are going ahead with much better support for patients and carers. The measures include: access to NHS Direct 24 hours a day; 24-hour crisis teams to respond in emergencies; more mental health beds of the right sort, in the right place; more hostels and supported housing; home treatment teams; and improved mental health training for GPs and others responsible for providing primary care. Other new developments in the NHS, including health action zones and the obligation on health authorities to prepare and implement health improvement programmes, will contribute to improving mental health treatment and care.

I would like to pay a particular tribute to all those who care for people with a mental illness. A great deal of that caring is done by parents, children, friends and neighbours. It is also done by dedicated professional staff. Their work can be very stressful and is sometimes dangerous. We owe them a great debt. They must deal, day after day, with the consequences of policy failures, shortcomings in the law and a lack of resources.

What needs to be done will clearly cost money. Last week, I announced that we had found an extra £185 million to invest in mental health services provided by council social services. Today, I can announce that that sum will be more than matched by our extra investment in national health service mental health services, which will total £510 million over the next three years. That adds up to about £700 million extra investment in mental health services over the next three years on top of the £3 billion already going in.

All that is investment for change. The Government and the public will expect that extra investment to make a discernible difference and help people across the range of mental health needs. At the end of three years, we expect there to be more 24-hour staffed beds, more secure beds, access to new drugs, assertive outreach teams where they are most needed, more day and respite care, more supported accommodation and improved services for children and adolescents.

All those and many more services will make sure that when people have a mental illness, they and their families can turn to top quality professionals to provide the best possible treatment and care in a system that is safe and sound for patients and the public.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his courtesy in letting me have an advance copy of his statement and for ensuring that on this occasion, it reached me in good time. I have questions about his proposals which I hope he will be able to answer today, but if he cannot, perhaps he will write to me.

First, will the Secretary of State confirm that the view of the profession is that care in the community has been an overwhelming success and that only a small number of inappropriate discharges have caused justifiable concern among the public?

Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that a major factor in patients defaulting on medication is the rationing of the latest atypical anti-psychotics? Will he give an assurance that community treatment orders will not be invoked until the patient has been given access to all appropriate medication, even if that medication costs more than that currently being used? Will he ensure that guidance from NICE on the prescribing of medication for patients with mental illness does not assume that all patients should start on the older, less satisfactory medication? If NICE recognises a drug as effective, will he ensure that it is always available on the NHS?

Will the Secretary of State commission a study on the real costs to our health service of providing the latest anti-psychotic medication, compared with providing in-patient treatment? Will he state what consultation he has had with those involved with all aspects of mental health, and what are the results of that consultation?

Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify the position of personality-disordered patients in relation to the Mental Health Act 1983 and state what discussions he has had with the Royal College of Psychiatrists regarding the prospects for treatment of those individuals?

Will the Secretary of State clarify the role of the Under–Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), in consulting the mental health charities and what reception he has had from those discussions? Is it true that the hon. Gentleman greatly offended the charity MIND with ill-advised comments about enforced treatment?

Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that care in the community has been in existence since the closure of Victorian-style asylums in the 1950s? Will he confirm that the policy of community treatment orders has caused concern among psychiatric nurses? What steps is he taking to ensure that their fears are not realised?

Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that the number of dangerously mentally ill patients, from whom the public need protection, accounts for a small proportion of the total population of mentally ill people?

What estimate has the Secretary of State made of the number of new in-patient beds that will be necessary if community treatment orders are not to prove utterly unworkable? How many of those beds will be provided in mixed-sex wards? What is his policy on mixed-sex wards for the mentally ill?

When will the Mental Health Act 1983 be replaced? *[Interruption.]* I think that some Labour Members do not understand the workings of the Act. Is it not the case that to implement community treatment orders a new mental health Act will be required? Why, in that case, has the Secretary of State failed to win time for one in the Queen's Speech? If mental health is such a priority for him, why could not time have been found in this year's Queen's Speech for a new mental health Act? Can the

right hon. Gentleman confirm—I hope that he will—that there will be no enforced medication for patients outside NHS premises?

Mr. Dobson: I cannot really thank the right hon. Lady for her welcome for what we are proposing. She asked me to confirm that the psychiatric profession's view is that care in the community was a success. It is my job to say what my views are. The right hon. Lady can find out from the profession what its views are. I think that it failed.

We are seeking the views of the various professionals involved in this matter, but some of the shortcomings in the present arrangements arise from the things that some of the professionals have got wrong in the past and, in my opinion, from their adherence to an over-optimistic view of the likely product of care in the community carried to extremes.

NICE will have the clear job of looking at new treatments and new pharmaceutical products, and advising on whether they are sound and should be widely used in the NHS. If they should, they will be funded.

I am afraid that I cannot read my notes. What was the right hon. Lady's fifth question? I am happy to take a hint.

Madam Speaker: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman will continue. I am sure that it will come to him eventually.

Mr. Dobson: What we have been saying all along is that we want to consult the people who have been involved in these matters but, in view of the track record of some of them, we will have to look carefully at what they say and not necessarily directly accept their advice. Some of them have been responsible for some of the things that have gone wrong. There is a new arrangement in hand and they will have to become accustomed to it, as will the people at MIND who did not like the Under-Secretary of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton), giving them an outline of what we intend to do.

I heard someone from MIND on the radio this morning and she apparently shares the right hon. Lady's view that there is really nothing wrong. I have seldom heard such a defence of the status quo as was apparent in the right hon. Lady's questions. She emphasised that the policy of care in the community has been in place for a long time. Indeed it has, and it has had time to show whether it works—it has shown that it has not worked. One cannot claim success for a policy that fails the most difficult cases, and that is certainly what has happened with care in the community.

We believe that the law needs to be changed to enable community treatment orders to be introduced; that is one of the reasons why we need to change the law. As I said in my statement, I recognise—it is fairly clear—that the dangerously mentally ill are a small minority. However, I have also emphasised that, until we sort out the crisis that they have created, proper attention will not be given to the other people who need help with their mental health.

We are not looking for national totals for beds. We are conducting a survey of all beds in the NHS to find out what is needed in each area so that we can identify what sort of beds are required. The fact that there is a surplus of beds in Norwich is of no consequence to those facing a shortage of beds in Bristol.

We want to eliminate mixed-sex wards. I have twice stepped in to prevent health trusts from following the policy of the previous Government and trying to create more mixed-sex wards. I will not tolerate such wards and they will be eliminated.

The right hon. Lady asked about the provision of legislative time in order to do these things. If she can sort out the Tory party's policy on the House of Lords so that we know whether it will obstruct the passage of our measures during this Session, perhaps we could introduce the legislation for which she apparently yearns.

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I warmly welcome many of the points made by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I welcome also the Government's recognition that serious problems are facing a minority within the community.

I find myself in some difficulty because I agreed with the first point made by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) about community care being a success for many thousands of people. There are many thousands, who do not make news headlines, who are better off cared for in the community as a consequence of the community care policy. At the same time, I accept that there have been some very serious failures and tragedies that should be addressed, and my right hon. Friend is right to address them.

I say that in the context of regretting the view of some people that there was a golden age of the lunatic asylum; there was not. I am old enough to remember the Stanley Royd hospital in my constituency and other long-stay psychiatric hospitals, which left a great deal to be desired. I welcome my right hon. Friend's points in that context.

I press my right hon. Friend on two specific points. First—I am particularly concerned about this—does he recognise the urgency of the reform of mental health laws? As he has said, these laws reflect the old asylum system rather than the reality of today's care in the community. We desperately need laws that underpin the work of those who are doing a valiant job in helping people to be cared for in the community.

Secondly—it will not be a surprise to my right hon. Friend—bearing in mind the number of [illegible]es that have occurred through a lack of inter-agency working, is it not about time that we addressed seriously the issue of a single community care authority?

Mr. Dobson: First, I shall answer my hon. Friend's final question. He has a great depth of professional and personal knowledge of these matters. I believe that there would still be boundaries wherever we drew the line. I am not in favour of having joint social services and national health service provision. I am sometimes told that such a system works brilliantly in Northern Ireland, while others tell me that it does not.

One of the greatest problems was that the old institutions were awful. In many instances, they were absolutely vile places. It is right that they have been closed down and that people have been moved out. The problem is that some people have been moved out without adequate provision being made for them, either in law or in terms of the services that are available to them. The Victorians may have built great lunatic asylums so that people were out of sight and out of mind; under the previous Government, people were turned out of hospital

[Mr. Dobson]

and off the books, but we can no longer tolerate that sort of thing. We must ensure that people are properly looked after.

My hon. Friend has made the point that I make whenever I speak on these matters, which is that only a small minority of people are a danger to others. However, there are a huge number who are endangered by not being properly looked after when they are walking the streets. In future, people in both those categories need to be properly looked after, and that is what we intend to do.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): First, will the Government accept our welcome for their intention to make mental health a greater priority for the national health service? In particular, we welcome the commitment to assertive outreach, early intervention and 24-hour services, whether they are drop-in services or admission into hospital beds for those who need that provision—and at present, often cannot have it. We join the Secretary of State in his tribute to those who care for the mentally ill, especially psychiatric nurses, community psychiatric nurses and psychiatric social workers, who are often in the front line undertaking extraordinarily difficult jobs.

Will the Government reflect, however, and consider whether it would be better as a policy not to be tough on care in the community, but tough in providing the resources for that care? Is it not the case that many of the problems that have made the front pages of the tabloid newspapers have been caused by overstretched teams not being able to provide such care, rather by people being out in the community and being cared for?

Is the Secretary of State able to tell us the number of beds that he estimates we need to open? More importantly, does not he accept that we are desperately short of psychiatric nurses, community psychiatric nurses and psychiatrists? How many more of these people will be engaged as a result of the resources that he is announcing today?

In the past eight years, there has been a cut of about one sixth in the share of the NHS budget spent on mental health. Will the funds that have been cut be restored? Will the £700 million be £113 million a year for the next three years, or £233 million for the next three years? There are two ways of calculating £700 million, and one total is only half of the other.

Does the Secretary of State accept that—to protect the public and the mentally ill from homicides and, much more often, suicides involving the mentally ill—we need to have better ways of controlling the moment of discharge, often by including a lay element? Does he accept also that—rather than telling people that they will be taken back into hospital if they do not take their drugs, taking away their civil liberties—the test should simply be whether people are well enough to be in the community?

Mr. Dobson: That was a set of weasel words at the end of the hon. Gentleman's questions. It is not simply a matter of people taking their drugs. Day in and day out—

Mr. Hughes: But—

Mr. Dobson: If the hon. Gentleman will listen for a moment, I shall answer his question. Day in and day out, even in purpose-built, small units trying to provide 24-hour care for those who can go out into the community, if someone has a bad episode—is on the turn—those who are running the place cannot keep that person in if he or she is determined to go out. That is nothing to do with medication but is a practical problem. We have to change the law to deal with that practical problem, and that is what we shall do. We are increasing the amount of money available and the proportion of NHS and social services money spent on the mentally ill. We think that it is right to do that.

I am sorry that I did not follow the hon. Gentleman's arithmetical gymnastics, in which he seemed to disappear halfway up the sum that he originally mentioned.

There are more specialist psychiatric nurses in training, and we want to ensure that there are sufficient nurses and other staff available to do the job that needs to be done. It is certainly true that, across the United Kingdom, there are overstretched teams. To help them, we plan to change the law, to provide extra resources and to change the way in which they go about things. We believe that those three actions combined will lead to a very substantial improvement in the service for all those who are mentally ill.

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Rothwell): Will my right hon. Friend ensure that, when it is recommended that a patient has electro-convulsive therapy, it will be certain that the hospital providing the therapy has up-to-date equipment and a technician or doctor trained in the use of that equipment, and that, if the patient has any uncertainty about accepting the treatment, the opinion of an independent second appointed doctor will be available before the treatment is provided?

Mr. Dobson: Anyone who is being treated in the national health service should be entitled to treatment using equipment that is sufficiently up to date to be safe and to do the job that it is intended to do, whether it is to treat patients for something that is physically or mentally wrong with them. It is certainly intended that all treatments should be administered by properly trained staff. There is royal college guidance on the matter, and it should be followed. If my hon. Friend feels that we have to follow up and augment the guidance with arrangements in the national health service, I should be happy to contemplate doing so. One of the reasons why we are giving responsibility for quality to the national health service is that we feel that current arrangements are not satisfactory.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I served on the Social Services Committee when it undertook a lengthy inquiry into adult mental illness and mental handicap. I warmly support the Secretary of State's statement. The recognition of the failings of care in the community for the more severely mentally ill is long overdue. In-patient hospital beds are required for that small minority. My constituency has experienced two or three tragic deaths as a result of the failure of the system. The Secretary of State made a statement some time ago that no further hospital beds would be closed in the mental health sector. Will he repeat that assurance and promise

that resources will be available to provide the necessary facilities for those with severe mental illness, particularly the more extreme cases of schizophrenia?

Mr. Dobson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind welcome for what I have said and for all the work that he did on the Select Committee, which he chaired with great distinction. On these issues, he sometimes appears to be more supportive of the present Government than he was of the previous one. I do not want to ruin his reputation with his colleagues. He developed a reputation for saying what he believed to be true, which is a good reputation to have anywhere, particularly in the House of Commons. I share his view that unless those who are in favour of care in the community are willing to recognise its failings, we shall not be able to address those failings and get on with the rest of the task.

We do not want any loss of psychiatric beds that does not make sense. We have slowed the process of closure and have instituted an independent review, which is new. There may still be some cases in which moving people out of some of the remaining large hospitals is an appropriate response, but, as the hon. Gentleman says, if that is going to happen, the people must be moved to somewhere that is suited to their needs. I remember drawing the analogy when I was a shadow health spokesman a dozen or more years ago of looking at the old institutions as broken down motor coaches. What is needed is something approaching a custom-built vehicle for everyone who moves out. Sadly, a lot of them have been left to walk.

Audrey Wise (Preston): I particularly welcome my right hon. Friend's reference to child and adolescent mental health services. I recommend that he ensures that his Department continues to keep an eye on that theme. When the Health Committee investigated the issue, it was concerned that neglect in childhood was worsening the situation for adult mental health. We were distressed to find that many of those engaged in child and adolescent mental health services felt that their service was a Cinderella of a Cinderella. I urge my right hon. Friend to keep his eye firmly on the issue for economic reasons as well as to ensure a good service.

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. Friend for what she has said and for her contribution to thinking on the issue. The strategy document refers to the views of the Select Committee on that. The services for children and adolescents are a neglected part of an already neglected service. We want to put that right.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement. Will he accept it from me that I have heard the president of the Royal College of Psychiatry say within the Palace that although the present policy constitutes major problems for those on the streets of the Secretary of State's constituency and mine, it has worked a good deal better in rural and suburban areas? Does the Secretary of State further agree that it is important that we achieve, if possible, as much of a bipartisan policy as we can on so serious an issue, and that we all have a responsibility to build on the common ground of analysis and fact?

Mr. Dobson: I accept most of what the right hon. Gentleman, who represents the neighbouring constituency to mine, says, but nobody could accuse me of bringing politics into this afternoon's statement.

Dr. Lynne Jones (Birmingham, Selly Oak): I commend my right hon. Friend on the sensitivity of his statement. One of my earliest recollections is visiting my father in what was known locally as the loony bin, and having my clothes prodded by elderly ladies who were dressed in clothes from the communal store and who looked like children. God forbid that we should ever return to those days of dehumanising institutionalisation. However, the principle of care in the community is not a failure; it is the inadequacy of its resourcing. Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that there will be sufficient well-trained staff with manageable case loads to provide care and support for the majority of mentally ill people who are not a threat to the community, and who for too long have suffered in silence either alone or, if they are lucky, with their families who are equally in despair? Will he ensure that sufferers and their carers are involved in the development of new services? Perhaps he could also consider establishing a mental health ombudsman to look at complaints across the boundaries of social services and health services which so often failed in the past?

Mr. Dobson: In relation to my hon. Friend's last point, the national health service ombudsman can deal with NHS issues and the local government ombudsman can deal with social services issues. There is nothing in law to prevent them from mounting a joint exercise in respect of issues at the boundary. I share her desire not to go back to the old institutions. The provision of care in the community certainly has been under-resourced, but it is not just a matter of under-resourcing. There was over-optimism among some of those concerned about the capacity of patients to cope outside institutions and a failure to provide the necessary back-up. The law is undoubtedly out of date and some of the practices have not been very sound. We are trying to address all three aspects. As I said in my statement, we want to work in collaboration with patients and carers in each locality because all the evidence is that when that is done effectively, it results in a better service for everyone and that is what we are after.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): The Secretary of State will be aware that people suffering from learning difficulties—or mental handicap, as it was once known—sometimes need to take drugs in the community. Can he confirm that his statement does not apply in any way to those with learning difficulties, and that each case will be considered on its merits? Does his statement apply only to England or to Wales and Scotland as well?

Mr. Dobson: The statement applies to England alone. We are talking not about the treatment of people with learning difficulties, but about mental health.

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the provision of more mental health

[Mr. Martin Linton]

beds will be a great step towards ensuring that people who should be in hospital are not kept in hostels? That would be some reassurance for the colleagues and relatives of Jennifer Morrison, who was killed in a hostel in my constituency only two or three weeks ago, and, indeed, for the neighbours of the hostel. Although care in the community was a bipartisan policy, we cannot be totally uncritical of the previous Government, who, between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, oversaw the closure of 50,000 to 60,000 beds in psychiatric hospitals without making care in the community a reality by ensuring that resources and the provision of hostels kept pace.

Mr. Dobson: I share my hon. Friend's proper concern for the relatives and friends of Jennifer Morrison, who—as we should always remember—died doing the job that we had asked her to do, in difficult and, as it turned out, fatal circumstances. The necessity is to provide services that are suited to the needs of each individual. A place in a hostel may be appropriate for some, whereas a place at home—provided that there is back-up—may be appropriate for others. In some cases, people should be held in secure accommodation. We must recognise the fact—some practitioners, I believe, do not like to recognise it—that people can move backwards and forwards across that spectrum; we are trying to ensure that we can respond sensitively and quickly to those changes.

Mr. David Faber (Westbury): The right hon. Gentleman's statement and some of his subsequent replies will have a somewhat hollow ring for my constituents in Warminster, where we learned with dismay this weekend that the mental health unit in the local hospital would close. The hospital is not large, if I may use his word; it is a small community hospital that serves a rural area, and its future will be threatened by the closure of the unit. Is he aware that his refusals to meet local health workers to discuss the closure or to answer my questions on it in the House have been viewed at best as discourteous by those who work in the hospital and by those whose family members are being treated there? Given the nature of his statement, will he or one of his Ministers undertake to meet those health workers and local people as soon as possible?

Mr. Dobson: I am not aware of the current state of any closure proposals for the unit to which he refers. I may have to take a decision on it, but I do not know off hand whether that is the case. If I do have to take a decision, I am, as ever, willing to meet the elected Members for the area or to get one of my colleagues to do so.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): I warmly welcome the measures that my right hon. Friend has outlined. I have never understood the argument that it is better to sleep rough or languish in prison than to be given proper short-term asylum and appropriate treatment—if one of my loved ones was involved, I know which option I would prefer. Will he consider the tragedy of the high number of suicides among teenagers? Does he envisage special measures to deal with that vulnerable group?

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. Friend, too, for all her efforts on this issue over the years, in and around Halifax, in the House and in other places. The increase in the number of young people who commit suicide is one of the most disturbing aspects of our society. No one has a ready explanation for that increase or for the general increase in mental illness among children and young people, but we hope that the specific measures that we are taking—not only through mental health services, but through the education service—will help to tackle the problem. We also hope that the changes that we are proposing as a result of the Utting inquiry into children in care will help, especially as a much higher proportion of children in care are mentally ill and a higher proportion of them subsequently commit suicide. Until we have a better explanation for the problem, however, it is hard to do anything about it.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I welcome the statement. Along with my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), I served on the Social Services Committee, and we tabled an amendment—which was not accepted—pressing for secure units and places of asylum. Having said that, I must confess that the general plan of community care has worked tremendously well and, in parts of Northern Ireland, it has been going on for 40 years to good effect.

May I press the Secretary of State on the number of occupational therapists who are being recruited? There is still a great need for such people to help folk with mental illness. Is there a process of reaching out to the Department of Social Security? Recently, I had a constituency case where benefit for a schizophrenic person was reduced from including the major care component to a lower care component. As a result, her husband was not able to look after her and she was readmitted to hospital. Surely there should be greater cross-referencing between the different branches of the caring professions.

Mr. Dobson: The hon. Gentleman's last point is valid, and we are looking at how we can provide a better package of care that includes money and direct help. We are trying to formulate that package, but it is rather difficult. If he has any further ideas, I will be happy to consider them.

Many therapists—not just occupational therapists—can make a contribution to helping people cope with living in the community, and we must try to make the system work as best we can. There was a time—it is still the case in certain circumstances now—when asylum was regarded as a good concept, and as a place of safety and security. However, the asylums became so disreputable that the concept suffered, and the bad reputation and stigma that attached to the word "asylum" have, to some extent, dominated much of the subsequent discourse on the matter. They have made some people reluctant to look at the idea of providing the secure care that is needed by some people.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): I welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, including what he said about the way in which the current system has failed a small number of desperately ill people. In my constituency, a young man, when seriously ill, murdered someone else. The most tragic part of the case was that his family had been trying desperately to get help for him and to get him into secure accommodation. They were not able to do so.

Does my right hon. Friend accept that if we bring in a new and renewable form of detention order, there may be some clear-cut cases but, with any such order, there will be difficult, borderline cases where decisions have to be made as to whether an order is brought in or not? What safeguards does he envisage for the bringing in of such orders? What protection will be provided to someone who might be subject to such an order?

Mr. Dobson: My hon. Friend rightly refers to the small number of what might be described as spectacular and awful failures, but the failure of the system went further than just the people who became a danger. There are many vulnerable people who are walking the streets and who are not getting the attention that they deserve. We should not forget them.

A renewable detention order raises deep and difficult ethical issues. I expect—although I cannot say, because we have asked some distinguished people to look at mental health law—that some form of protection for the individual will be recommended, relating both to people's clinical state and to their freedom as individuals. Both concepts will have to be brought to bear when decisions are made.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I welcome much of what the Secretary of State has to say, but will he accept a sixth invitation to agree with the statement that he was wrong to describe community care as failing outright? That gives major concern to people who work in the area. May I invite him to agree that community care may have failed in a few areas for a few patients, but that generally when it has failed, it is because it has never been tried, as it has always been inadequately funded?

Does the Secretary of State accept that in Oxfordshire, with a mental health trust that is effectively in receivership, and with experience of the failures in the tragic Raus and Darren Carr cases, we would be concerned to learn that the extra money allocated to mental health will not compensate for the real-terms cut in funding that Oxfordshire social services received in the standard spending assessment announced last week?

Does the Secretary of State finally accept that rationing—the "R" word that dare not speak its name from the Government Front Bench—has applied in mental health, the Cinderella specialty, not only in the use or lack of use of new anti-psychotics, but in the provision of beds for the mentally ill near where their families live, and not miles away? Many of my constituents have had to go to Wales to visit their loved ones. Does he accept that rationing exists and that his funding could at least reduce the amount of rationing that occurs in this specialty?

Mr. Dobson: One or two people seem to think that a system that has led to an unacceptable number of homicides and suicides has been a success, but I am afraid that that is not my interpretation. I think that the system of care in the community failed as a totality, because it failed in the most difficult circumstances. One cannot claim success for an arrangement that fails in a crisis. I fully accept that it delivered for a substantial number of people—

Miss Widdecombe: Ah.

Mr. Dobson: The right hon. Lady reacts as though I had never said that before, but I said it in the statement. No doubt she was preparing at the time to jump up and announce that the system had been a success. The people who have committed suicide or killed others are not the only failures. All over the country there are vulnerable people who have not been properly looked after, and that cannot be regarded as a success.

We have just announced that we are putting an extra £700 million into mental health care, on top of the £3 billion already being spent. That is a big step forward, and it is disproportionately greater than the increase in spending on other aspects of health care. We are moving in the right direction. We may not be moving as fast as the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) would like, but then again, we have to find the money, and he does not.

Tabling Questions

4.23 pm

Mr. James Gray (North Wiltshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will be aware that, since the amalgamation of the Department of the Environment and the Department of Transport after the general election, it has been the custom for Back Benchers to table oral questions on the environment and on transport separately. Were you aware that, as of today, that practice has been stopped and Back Benchers now have to choose between the environment and transport? Was that decision yours, or was it the Government's; if the latter, would you agree that it is another example of the Government's reluctance to face up to proper scrutiny from Back Benchers?

Madam Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving me an indication of his point of order in advance. He is of course right to say that questions will no longer be divided between environment and the regions on the one hand and transport on the other. As a result, hon. Members may submit only one oral question instead of two, as was the practice earlier. The question rota is issued on the instructions of the Government. In the normal course of events, changes are discussed through the usual channels. If the hon. Gentleman wants to pursue the issue, may I suggest that he pursues it through the usual channels?

Mr. Gray: Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. I have checked with the usual channels, and it has not been discussed in that way so far.

Madam Speaker: That is not my business. The usual channels are the usual channels. My business is the Speaker's business.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. The news of the change has only just filtered through. The information process does not seem to have worked. Will you inquire why hon. Members were not notified of the change? Until today, there were two opportunities for tabling questions to be answered in a fortnight. No notice or circular has been issued. Hon. Members have gone into the Table Office expecting to be able to table two questions—

Madam Speaker: Order. There has been no indication to hon. Members about the change, but of course it is clear on the Order of Questions, which is available to all hon. Members. All one needs to do is to look at the Order of Questions, and there it is.

Orders of the Day

Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition.

4.26 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Bill does not introduce any new charges. It simply makes it easier for hospitals to collect from insurance companies charges that they have been entitled to collect for nearly 70 years. The present arrangements simply do not work, so the health service is losing a great deal of money. Nobody really knows how much. Estimates range from about £50 million a year to £500 million. Whatever the figure is, it is clear that, if the charges were collected properly, national health service hospitals would be a lot better off.

Under the present law, there are two charges. One is an emergency treatment fee of £21.30, which is supposed to be collected directly from any driver who needs immediate treatment from a doctor after a road accident. The other charge is supposed to be levied on insurers when a motor accident victim makes a successful claim for compensation. At present, this charge can be up to £295 for out-patient treatment and up to £2,949 for in-patient treatment.

Those charges do not work. They combine minimal income with maximum inconvenience. Last year, they raised just £16 million. To collect the emergency treatment fee, NHS staff must ask injured motorists for the money in the immediate aftermath of an accident. That causes maximum offence to the motorists, who may be in shock or pain. They sometimes get the impression that it is a charge for the use of an NHS ambulance. It is not.

Asking for the money is a rotten task for the staff who are supposed to do it. It is a diversion from their real job of looking after patients. In many cases, the emergency treatment fee is literally more trouble than it is worth.

Such problems are not confined to the emergency treatment fee. Motorists and other victims may be pressed while in accident and emergency, or even in a hospital bed, to say whether they are going to make a claim against somebody who caused the accident. Alternatively, they may be sent a letter out of the blue to ask them the same question.

The problems of collecting the charges do not end there. Hospitals sometimes send out letters to motorists to demand payment of one or both charges. That is because it is up to each hospital to track down the organisation responsible for paying the compensation. Each hospital must calculate the costs of the individual treatment provided to each motor accident victim, separating in-patient treatment costs from out-patient treatment costs. Each hospital then has to track the progress of each compensation claim.

The average motor accident injury claim takes two years to process, and many take much longer. The hospital must bill the insurer, and then chase them up and make sure that the debt has been paid. The motorist can get dragged into the process at various stages.

Faced with such protracted and laborious arrangements, most hospitals do not get much income from the charges. Some employ collection agencies, but they have to pay them for their service, which reduces the takings for the hospitals.

We have decided to end that shambles, and to help to make sure both that hospitals can collect the money to which they are entitled and that charges reflect the true cost of the treatment involved. For a start, we have decided to abolish the right of NHS hospitals to levy the emergency treatment fee. General practitioners who attend road accident victims will still be able to levy the fee if they choose to do so.

Having decided that the main charge should be collected properly in future, we considered very carefully how best to go about it. We consulted widely not just within the NHS but with the Association of British Insurers and some individual insurers. We also kept the Law Commission and the Law Society informed of developments. I am most grateful to them all for their advice and help. All concerned with the present scheme wanted a simpler, clearer, quicker and less costly system, and that is what we intend to deliver.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): During the debate on the Queen's Speech, the Secretary of State said that it had been estimated that the charge might raise anything between £30 million and £500 million. Can he be more specific today, and if not, why not? Given that he previously led the House to believe that the Government did not favour the introduction of any new charges—presumably he will say that these charges are old charges that are merely being collected—can he confirm that the Government are happy about, and supportive of, all the other charges currently placed on people who use the NHS?

Mr. Dobson: The Bill is about one charge that hospitals have lawfully collected since 1930, and another that has been lawfully collected by hospitals since 1933. I understand that both were introduced with the support of the Liberal party. All we are doing is getting rid of one of them, and making the other one work. There is nothing new about either of them.

We propose that the compensation recovery unit of the Benefits Agency should take on the job of getting the money in and distributing it to hospitals. The compensation recovery unit was set up in 1990 by the previous Government to recover state benefits where both benefits and compensation had been paid out in respect of the same accident, injury or illness. Insurers are required to notify the recovery unit of claims for compensation, so the unit is well placed to take on the additional task of collecting NHS charges.

There are many advantages to our proposal: the recovery unit has a good track record; the unit has good relations with the insurance industry and proven procedures; insurers will need to deal with only one central unit instead of several hundred individual hospitals; the work will be done at minimum administrative cost to all concerned; hospitals will be relieved of an onerous task; the process will require minimal involvement of motorists; and the proposal will secure around 50 jobs on Tyneside, where the recovery unit is situated. The insurance industry supports the proposal.

In a further effort to simplify and reduce administrative costs, we propose to introduce a tariff of charges so that every hospital, every insurer and the recovery unit will know how much the charge is likely to be in every case. In most cases, the only patient information that will need to be transmitted is whether motorists were treated in an NHS hospital as out-patients, and how many days they spent in hospital if they were treated as in-patients. The insurance industry supports that proposal, too.

The charges will be set out in regulations, and will be made up of two items. The first will be a flat rate fee for those who do not need to stay in hospital. Initially, the flat rate fee will be set at £354, no matter how many out-patient attendances are involved. The second item will be a daily rate charge for those who need to stay in hospital, and that will be set at £435 per day initially.

The new tariff has been calculated to reflect the current cost of treating road accident victims. It is expected to bring in a total amount that broadly reflects the costs of treating those who make a successful claim against another driver. As part of the arrangement, I have concluded that it would not be in the spirit of the proposed new system to impose open-ended liabilities on insurers, so there will be a ceiling of £10,000 on a single charge. Both the tariff and the ceiling will be set by regulations, and uprated as necessary.

Following our consultations with the motor insurance industry, we propose that the new charges should apply to treatment given in respect of accidents that happened on or after 2 July 1997, when the Chancellor first announced our intention to collect the full cost of treatment. Treatment for accidents that happened before that date will be charged at the new tariff, but subject to a ceiling of £3,000.

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): Does the £10,000 limit relate to an individual or to an accident? For example, in the case of a coach, 30 or 40 individuals might be involved. Would the liability be multiplied by the number of people in the coach?

Mr. Dobson: It would be per person, as would all compensation claims of that sort. There is nothing different about the claim in question.

As the House knows, the Motor Insurers Bureau, financed by the insurance industry, pays compensation to victims of road accidents caused by drivers who are either uninsured or have disappeared. Under the Bill, the NHS will be able for the first time to collect charges from the Motor Insurers Bureau. By regulations, we will make it clear that payments will be sought from the bureau only in respect of accidents that happen after the Bill is enacted.

The new charging process will be straightforward. It involves adding just one question to the existing standard form, which insurers are already required to send to the recovery unit. It will report which NHS hospital, if any, treated a motor accident claimant. The recovery unit will then get from the hospital concerned confirmation that the claimant was an out-patient, and, if an in-patient, how many days he or she spent in the hospital.

The unit will then be able to collect the charge from the insurer as soon as the overall claim is settled, and pass it on to the hospital. Unless there is some dispute,

[Mr. Dobson]

each motorist's involvement should amount to nothing more than telling his or her insurer if he or she received treatment in an NHS hospital.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): Will the Secretary of State clarify one point? If, as a result of a subsequent court case, a motorist were found to be entirely innocent of any blame in an accident that led him or her to receive hospital treatment, would the other party, who was blameworthy, have to accept the entire bill for all the parties involved in the treatment?

Mr. Dobson: The whole question rests on there being a successful compensation claim in the first place. If there is such a claim, it will include the NHS costs. If there is not—possibly, in the circumstances to which the right hon. Gentleman referred—the NHS would not get any money.

We also propose to give insurance companies, for the first time, the right to ask for a review of charges in a particular case, and, where appropriate, to appeal to a tribunal.

There have been a number of scare stories about what we propose. Some people have claimed that we are introducing new charges. Others have claimed that what we are doing will lead to large increases in motor insurance premiums. Neither is true. Nothing is new in principle about what we propose. Insurers have been liable for such charges since 1930. We are merely ensuring that, in future, NHS hospitals will get the money to which they have been entitled for the past 68 years.

The present collection arrangements are such a shambles that no really firm data exist on which to base estimates of the likely sums that may be raised under the new scheme. The best estimates that I can come up with range from around £100 million to about £150 million in England—about £120-odd million to £165 million in Great Britain. The ABI estimates that, if the total impact of what we propose were to be passed on to motorists, premiums might rise by 2 to 3 per cent., or around £6 to £9 per policy holder. That is the ABI's estimate, not mine.

To put this in perspective, again according to the ABI, motor insurance premiums have risen by an average of 16 per cent. for comprehensive policies and 12 per cent. for non-comprehensive policies since 1996. The proposals will have no impact on the no claims bonus of the drivers making the claim for compensation.

In any case, there is good reason to believe that not all the costs will be passed on to motorists' premiums. It was in July last year that we first announced our intention to collect the actual cost of treatment, and we hope to introduce the new scheme from April next year. That means that, by the time the new scheme comes into operation, insurers will have had nearly two years to adjust. That was borne out the other day, when Direct Line was quoted as saying:

"rises would be minimal as most insurers have already factored in potential NHS claims".

The Association of British Insurers was quoted as saying:

"most companies already take their liability under the existing law into account when assessing premiums."

The principal concern of the insurers has been the fear of retrospective action to recover the sums not collected over the years. In a meeting with me, the ABI said that it would be prepared to accept 2 July 1997 as the operative date for the changes. It welcomes the simplified arrangements and the tariff system that we propose, so our proposals will not place a large burden on motorists or motor insurers.

The new scheme will bring order out of chaos. It is a sensible, practical measure that will raise much needed extra funds for hospitals in every part of the country. It is sound in principle, and it will work in practice; that is why I commend it to the House.

4.41 pm

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): I beg to move, To leave out from 'That' to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'this House declines to give a Second Reading to the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill because the Bill further adds to the burdens the Government has imposed on both commercial and private motorists in that insurance premiums will rise; notes that the proposal did not appear anywhere in the Labour Party's election manifesto, and conflicts with the Government's express opposition to extending charges in the NHS; further notes that these charges will apply only to motorists and not to victims of other insurable accidents; and calls on the Government to clarify its future intentions with regard to both the level and range of any future additional charges in the NHS, and to take into account the impact on the motorist when determining the amounts to be charged.'

It may reassure the Secretary of State to know that the Opposition have some sympathy with some of the aims in his Bill, but we will press our amendment, because certain aspects concern us, and I would welcome clarification of them when the Minister replies.

All Government measures must be considered in the context of overall policy. At the moment, it seems that the Government are determined to penalise motorists. I might have been sympathetic to a proposal to make more effort to collect charges from insurance companies, but I am bound to observe that the Bill will have a disproportionate effect on one group of people who use the NHS.

The Government have already raised fuel duty by 20 per cent., and vehicle excise duty by 3.4 per cent. They have taken powers for an entirely new registration tax on new vehicles. By the end of this Parliament, they will have charged motorists more than £9 billion in extra taxation. If we were to use the Secretary of State's quaint method of counting, that would probably come to £18 billion over three years. If so, one would be tempted to observe that motorists were being asked to fund all the increases that he has promised for the NHS. Perhaps he will not on this occasion insist on his favoured method of counting increases.

It has been estimated—the Secretary of State more or less confirmed it when he mentioned a figure of up to £9—that the proposals will add another £10 or so to motor car insurance premiums; I am happy to come down to £9. On its own, that might not have been too serious, whether the figure was £6, £7, £8, £9 or £10, but, in combination with all the other costs that the Government have inflicted on the motorist, it is of more significance than it otherwise would have been.

Can the Secretary of State explain the position of uninsured drivers? As I read his proposals—I am happy to be corrected—the NHS will not write off the cost if the driver is uninsured, and will not charge the driver directly. Rather, law-abiding motorists will effectively be

charged twice, in that their insurance premiums will have to reflect the costs of uninsured drivers' treatment, even though they have already paid taxes to cover such treatment. What guarantees are there that the income from this charge will not end up as a substitute for Treasury funding? What assurances, if any, will the Government give that they will not increase insurance premium tax?

Where does this stop? What about victims of other insurable accidents? Will the Secretary of State extend such charges to them, or will he give an absolute guarantee that that is not the Government's intention?

What about cases of self-inflicted injury? If the Secretary of State proposes to extend his charges to that group, does he agree that he is introducing a new principle into the NHS of a double whammy on anyone prudent enough to take out insurance? If he does not intend to extend such charges, why pick on the motorist rather than those whose actions are entirely self-inflicted and cost the NHS a great deal in care and treatment? What about those who practise dangerous sports? Where does it stop? Does it stop at all?

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): Perhaps the right hon. Lady will explain to the House why she voted for the legislation in 1988.

Miss Widdecombe: We did not add the measure to the cumulative effect of a series of taxes that penalise one group of people who may use the NHS. That is exactly what the Government are doing. If the hon. Gentleman had listened—he usually does—he would have found that, right at the beginning, I said that we might have had some sympathy for the Bill but for the cumulative effect on motorists.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: No, I have just given way on that point. I now want to make some progress.

I was about to say, before I was interrupted, that I was grateful to the Secretary of State for one thing—the assurance that the new charges would not be levied retrospectively. I am glad that he has said that. I take it from what he has said that, even though the hospitals could have collected the money under the 1988 powers and too often did not, there is no suggestion that that should now be recovered. I am sure that that will be welcome both to the insurance companies and to motorists.

Will the Secretary of State accept that the measure is proof positive that we ration health care services in the NHS, and that there is only a limited amount that can be done? After all, the Government have boasted, with their quaint method of accounting, that they have put £21 billion extra into the NHS, yet they still find it necessary to fine motorists £10 for the crime of needing hospital treatment. Does that not say it all? Is it not true that the National Institute for Clinical Excellence will ration treatment and services throughout our health care system?

I wonder how comfortable the Minister of State feels today. He described the Road Traffic Act 1988 as a sick law. He has tried to get out of that since then by saying that he was referring to the 1930s regulations, but his comments were made in 1995, when the issue of the day was an order that simply increased the scale of charges for the liability incurred. So what was he then complaining about? Was he complaining that a little more money was being collected from insurance companies? So today he decides to collect a vast amount more. He described the 1988 Act as a tax on accidents, and today he seeks to increase that very tax.

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): We have heard this tired old record from the right hon. Lady before. Unfortunately, it does not quite fit with the facts.

My concerns in 1994 arose from a case in which two of my constituents faced an emergency treatment fee following an accident involving their three or four-year-old daughter. I thought that the emergency treatment fee was wrong in principle, as it was levied by the hospital. I argued then that it should be abolished. I am pleased that the Government are abolishing it now. I know that the right hon. Lady is intent on torturing the facts until they confess, but she might spend a little time explaining why her Government promised to abolish the emergency treatment fee, and then failed to deliver on that promise.

Miss Widdecombe: The right hon. Gentleman refers explicitly to a tax on accidents. There is not much other description that one can give to the charges that the Government are now extending than a tax on accidents. That is what he condemned, and what he is now promoting.

On the emergency fee, let me again give some comfort to the Secretary of State, and say that we welcome that measure. We shall not seek to oppose it. We said that, when a suitable legislative vehicle, arose we would use it to abolish the fee.

Mr. Milburn: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: No. I have given way to the Minister on this point.

The Secretary of State has consistently said, "No new charges," but now he proposes just that. So much for Labour's sacrosanct principle of an NHS free at the point of consumption.

Lastly, I am somewhat concerned—I am open to conviction on this—that the mechanisms that are being put in place will be expensive and bureaucratic. Those who are responsible for collecting moneys have claimed that the problem is not so much the method of collection as the fact that the sums involved for individual trusts are so small compared to the bureaucracy of claiming them in the first place that there has been no incentive to claim. In what way do the proposed methods represent increased simplicity over the old methods?

We have some sympathy with the measure—[HON. MEMBERS: "Then show it."] We are pressing our amendment to a vote. We have some sympathy with the measure, but I am concerned by the cumulative effect on motorists.

Mr. Dobson: So why does the amendment state:

"this House declines to give a Second Reading to the . . . Bill"?

Miss Widdecombe: That is how a reasoned amendment is phrased. The right hon. Gentleman has

[Miss Widdecombe]

been in the House all these years, but appears not to know that—he learns something new every day, does he not? If the Bill receives Second Reading, we shall examine in detail in Committee some of the points that I have raised today.

The Bill would result in a most unfortunate additional imposition on motorists, at a time when substantial impositions have already been levied. If the measure stood alone, it might not be so significant. The Labour Government generally seek to bash the motorist, and the frivolity with which Labour Members have treated the subject lends credence to our belief that they do not take such matters seriously.

I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure us on uninsured drivers. Why should law-abiding motorists pay twice? Why are they, uniquely, being picked on? I have no complaint about the fact that the Secretary of State is, quite properly, reviewing the collection of the charges, but why has he not reviewed the groups from whom the charges are collected? Why does he not perceive the obvious illogicality in picking on only one group of people, who use the national health service at a time when they are extremely vulnerable—in an emergency, when they are often badly injured, ill and in need of major treatment? Surely that is not the group that should be singled out for progressive taxation.

Mr. Dobson: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Miss Widdecombe: I was about to finish, but I shall give way.

Mr. Dobson: The arguments that the right hon. Lady has adduced over the past few minutes suggest that she believes that the charge should be repealed entirely. It has been in existence since 1930; it was reconfirmed and extended in 1933; and it was last reaffirmed by the House in 1988, under the Conservative Administration of which she was a member. All we are doing is ensuring that, in future, insurers will pay the money that they should pay.

Miss Widdecombe: All the right hon. Gentleman is doing is putting an extra charge on the motorists. [HON. MEMBERS: "No, he is not."] Yes, he is: he is saying that he will raise a great deal of extra money through the proposed collection method. He is fond of referring to events that occurred under the Conservative Government, so let me point out that, when we introduced more efficient collection procedures to raise money from existing taxes, the then Labour Opposition counted that as a tax rise. Now they are getting a dose of their own medicine.

The Secretary of State is levying an extra charge on motorists, at a time when substantial charges have already been levied. The Bill is not the most sensible of measures, but I hope that it can be improved in Committee, and that the right hon. Gentleman will stop laughing at the plight of the law-abiding motorist, who will have to pay twice for the rest.

4.53 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): To listen to the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), one would think that there was a charge on the patient, but there is no charge whatsoever on the patient. The idea that the Government will take money from vulnerable people is nonsense. What they will do is take money from the insurance companies that should have been paying it in the first place. The fact is that fewer bills will be sent out after the Bill is passed, because the Government are getting rid of the emergency charge. That is the charge that causes aggravation and distress to people who are asked for the money when they are in casualty, or who get a letter in the post. The Conservative never achieved the objective of getting rid of that charge, but the Labour Government are doing it.

I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on having found a slot in the legislative programme for the Bill. I am disappointed that it is to be opposed and will therefore take more time. If the Opposition, both here and in another place, were more co-operative, we could get through more legislation, but that is obviously not going to happen.

On 22 July, I asked the Secretary of State about this matter and he said that it was wrong for the insurance companies not to pay. His Department had calculated the figure at £50 million, but the Automobile Association estimated that it was £440 million. The correct amount of money will now be paid to the national health service.

The legislation will not affect all those who are injured in road accidents; it will affect only the innocent victims. For example, if I fall asleep behind the wheel, have an accident and I am treated in hospital, I obviously will not be able to claim against anyone else's insurance. In the absence of any claim, the NHS will continue to treat me for free. However, if there were a passenger in the car, he or she could claim against my insurance. The NHS will still bear the vast cost of treating road accident victims.

The charge was first drawn to my attention as a Member of Parliament when I took up the case of a constituent who had received an emergency bill. I was told that the legislation had been on the statute book for decades and that my constituent simply had to send the money to the insurance company. The bill would then be paid and there would be no problem with the no-claims bonus. Initially, it seemed to be a good way of raising money for the NHS. However, the emergency fees have caused problems, and I am glad that the Government have decided not to pursue the issue and to abolish those charges.

I have examined the real terms cost to hospitals and the amounts that they receive in compensation. In one year, my local hospital received back about £80,000 after treating 1,000 patients. I pressed my local hospital about the matter—there was a Conservative Government and the trust budget was facing a shortfall—and it managed to raise more than £100,000. However, that is not a great deal of money when viewed in the context of 1,000 road accidents.

I am pleased that the money will now go to the hospitals that treat the patients. That is a great advantage for areas such as Cumbria, where we have a sparse population but many tourists. This measure is better for rural areas as it is not fair to put the money into a general pool. My local hospital will benefit considerably. Many visitors to Cumbria—probably too many—travel by car and there is a considerable number of road accidents each year. The hospital received £100,000 last year, but the treatment of one overseas tourist in the Cumberland

infirmary cost £45,000. That puts the matter in context. In that case, the German insurance company paid the bill and there was no problem.

Although we expect this legislation to raise considerable extra money for the NHS, the reality is that the health service will never have enough money. Cumbria has done very well under this Government: we are to have a new district general hospital and there is a health action zone in the north of the county. However, my constituents realise that resources will always be scarce and it is wrong to claim that this legislation is unpopular with the general public. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have picked the wrong approach—the Liberals always do.

My local newspaper, the *News and Star*, surveyed the population on this issue—it is called a vox pop. Nine out of 10 people interviewed thought that it was a good idea that their insurance companies—not they—should pay the NHS to treat road accident victims in the same way as those companies pay to repair the vehicles involved in the accidents. The proposal is popular. I am pleased that the Secretary of State is introducing the Bill and that it will be implemented by April. *[Interruption.]* I am glad that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald thinks that that is funny.

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): My point is not meant to be confrontational. I know that the hon. Gentleman's constituency is in Cumbria. Does he think that the Bill's principle should be applied to people who come from outside that area to do mountaineering or hill walking because the local health service pays for their care if they are injured while taking part in those activities?

Mr. Martlew: The principle is specific to the Bill. The existing legislation, which has been in place since the 1930s, was amended by the previous Government in 1988, and all sides of the House have agreed to it. There is now some carping about the level of the charges. People are prepared to pay a little extra—that is all it will cost and if competition works properly, there might be no extra cost—through their insurance to ensure that payment is made to the NHS. If the Opposition do not believe that, they are out of tune with their electors.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): Will the hon. Gentleman explain what he believes to be the difference between motor insurance paying for someone's health care and general health insurance paying for such care?

Mr. Martlew: There is a great difference. This proposal is acceptable and has been since the 1930s. Any other proposal would be unacceptable and would go against our commitments. We gave a commitment on this measure and we shall stick to it.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Where?

Mr. Martlew: We made a commitment on charges and we are getting rid of several charges for people who are affected by the legislation. We shall reduce the number of those charges by three quarters. I am sure that when hospitals receive the money, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and her hon. Friends will not say, "Send it back to those poor insurance companies. They cannot afford it." They will accept the situation. Conservative Members are making mischief. I shall support the Bill.

Miss Widdecombe: The hon. Gentleman continually refers to insurance companies paying. How does he think that insurance companies get money if not from the people who insure with them?

Mr. Martlew: I have already said that if there is an extra charge, my constituents will accept that it is a price worth paying to support the health service. The insurance companies should have been paying that money all along. In some cases they have frustrated the hospitals' and trusts' claims for money by not co-operating. Time and time again, we find that the Tories would sooner support insurance companies than support the national health service.

5.3 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): My colleagues and I will vote for the reasoned amendment in our names if it is selected by Madam Speaker or by you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. If it is not selected, we will vote for the amendment tabled by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and her colleagues.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman was not present at the beginning of the debate when Madam Speaker announced that she had selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. That is the decision on the selection of amendments.

Mr. Hughes: In that case, we shall, perforce, support the amendment tabled by the Conservative Opposition because we cannot vote on our reasoned amendment. We have reservations about the way in which the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has drafted the amendment because it is rather pro-motorist.

Miss Widdecombe: Rather!

Mr. Hughes: We are unhappy about that stance. The debate should be about how the health service raises money rather than whether motorists are clobbered by the measure. I shall turn to the details of that issue in a moment.

I apologise to hon. Members for the fact that the reasoned amendment in the names of my colleagues and myself, as I have already pointed out to the Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald and Madam Speaker, should have read, "on the grounds that it makes provision for payment by requiring those who successfully claim compensation for personal injury sustained in road traffic accidents but not by any other means". I do not know whether that omission was caused by my handwriting, my drafting or by an error somewhere else, but I hope that I have corrected the record.

As I told the Secretary of State during the debate on the Queen's Speech, we support the abolition of the emergency treatment fee. It was too bureaucratic to collect

[Mr. Hughes]

the charge, and the cost of collection was not worth the candle of the payment. I share the Secretary of State's view that it had an indignity about it.

If that is out of the way, this debate is about changing the rules for collecting another source of money which, as the Secretary of State rightly said, has been available for collection since the 1930s. The Secretary of State's researchers may have done a better job than me. If it is true that my predecessors and the Secretary of State's predecessors—old though he is, he is not that old—voted—[HON. MEMBERS: "Old Labour."] No, not old Labour, just old. If our predecessors voted for the measure in 1930 or 1938, that was almost two decades, or thereabouts, before the NHS came into being. Raising money for health services in those days was a whole different ball game from when we set up the national health service, which was voted for in this place by the Labour party and the Liberals and opposed by the Conservatives. We put in place a health service paid for by taxes, not charges. This debate is about whether this is a proper charge, a new charge and whether it should be supported.

I accept that, as the Secretary of State said, this is not a new charge. Therefore, I accept that in this Bill the Government have not broken any commitment not to raise any new charges to pay for the health service. It is an old charge, but it was not collected. It is a convenient source to which the Government can turn to add a bit more money to the kitty. I understand their reasons for doing it. It provides a way of raising money that is consistent with the Government's commitments.

However, it changes the amount of money raised through charges and, in that context, it is a little like the Government's announcement about raising prescription charges earlier in the year. Last year their policy was that raising prescription charges would be a tax on patients, the poor and the sick. This year, lo and behold, they raised them. This measure will mean that more money will be collected from charges, directly from the insurance companies but inevitably, as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald said, indirectly it will come from those who pay insurance companies. Insurance companies have no money of their own other than that paid to them. The Bill will increase the charges collected for the NHS from some of the people in Britain when they pay their motor insurance.

I doubt whether the motor insurance industry believes that it can do all that without putting up our premiums by a penny—only time will tell. I have never known a free lunch and I have never known insurance companies reduce charges when the bill for them has gone up. We will hear that debate in Committee and, no doubt, we will debate how much the charges might go up and when.

The reasons why my hon. Friends and I have reservations and cannot support the Bill on Second Reading are summarised in our reasoned amendment. We do not believe that it is principled to raise more money for the health service from charges. My party stands by a national health service paid for through taxation. There is a range of charges that contribute to the health service including prescription charges and appliance charges. There are also charges paid by pensioners, who are the only group in society who have money recouped if they go into hospital because some of their pension is taken back. That does not mean that adding to an anomalous hotch-potch of charges is right. We do not think that it is.

At my party's conference this year we agreed a motion committing us to looking at all charges in the health service. I do not know the outcome of those deliberations, but, when we reach our conclusion, which will be well before the next election, we may decide to commit the party to abolishing those charges. It may be—

Mr. Kevin Hughes (Doncaster, North): The hon. Gentleman's party will have to be in government.

Mr. Hughes: We are moving towards that position as fast as the Labour party was before the general election.

Mr. Martlew: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Hughes: I shall give way in a moment.

As an eternal optimist and as someone who watches the political runes, I think that we are well on the way to being in government long before the hon. Member for Doncaster, North (Mr. Hughes) retires from politics, and certainly long before I and my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton (Jackie Ballard) retire.

Mr. Martlew: How much will the policy of abolishing charges cost and how much would it be necessary to increase income tax to ensure that exactly the same amount of money went into the NHS as goes in now? There will be no betterment by abolishing charges and increasing tax, will there?

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman has asked a proper question. We have asked our policy people to examine the implications this year and in future years. The hon. Gentleman is right that abolishing charges means that the money lost must be recouped. If it has to be recouped through taxation, more money must come from taxation somewhere. It may not be taxation for those at the lower end of the income scale. It may be, as my party believes, that taxpayers at the higher end of the income scale should pay more tax. That is a policy that we reaffirmed this year, a policy that is not yet supported by the Government in spite of their historic commitment to redistribution of wealth.

Ms Drown: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Simon Hughes: I will give way one more time.

Ms Drown: Is a possible outcome of the hon. Gentleman's party's review of charges also that it may end up supporting current charges and the method of collection that is being proposed by the Government, or is that being ruled out in his party's review of charges?

Mr. Hughes: No. The hon. Lady asks a perfectly proper question but it is mischievous.

The reality is that if we examine whether we should keep charges or lose them, everything might be considered. I have heard no voices in my party saying that we should introduce additional charges to the health service. My presumption is that my party will want to reduce charges rather than increase them. However, in

theory it is possible that things might go in a different direction. In a democratic, one-person, one-vote party, the members will decide.

Jackie Ballard (Taunton): Not Millbank.

Mr. Hughes: Certainly not Millbank and certainly not through the block votes of anyone because we all come with a block vote of one.

Secondly, we are not faced with a coherent policy for reviewing charges. I would have liked the Secretary of State to make the announcement at the time of the comprehensive spending review. I would have liked him to say, "We have reviewed all the charges and for a reason that I shall now explain there is a reason behind this charge but not any other." No such luck. The charge is before us only because it happens to exist.

It is a rather funny policy. It is rather like a policy that I do not hear espoused regularly from the Government Benches: "We will support the hereditary peers because they happen to exist." The Government's charging policy is being supported only because it happens to exist. That is hardly a principled basis for keeping a policy. It would have been far better to examine all charges and ascertain whether the Government's proposal is supported by logic.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset) *rose—*

Mr. Hughes: I hope that in a moment I shall be able to persuade the House that it is not.

Mr. Letwin: I am tempted by the hon. Gentleman's most recent remarks to ask him whether he will confirm that the Government have rather said that they will be perfectly happy to have hereditary peers, or at any rate 91 of them, because they are there in the House of Lords.

Mr. Hughes *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) is following the track along which he went last night in introducing entirely extraneous matter.

Mr. Hughes: I had not dreamt of being distracted, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Thirdly, if the Government are considering introducing charges, I flag up the question whether there are some people who use the NHS who perhaps should pay—not those who are United Kingdom residents, not nationals of countries with reciprocal arrangements with the UK and not those who come as asylum seekers and therefore ask to use NHS benefits—such as those who come to this country as income earners who are perfectly well financially endowed. They come here on that basis and yet they are treated under the NHS. There is an issue there. The Government have raised it and the previous Conservative Government raised it. It is one that seems to be outside the debate about whether UK residents should pay taxes, or those to whom we have obligations in this country.

The fourth reason why the Government's approach is problematic has been alluded to by the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald. If we charge people who use their cars through their insurance, it is not a progressive tax. The reality is that the poor pay as much as the well off in many senses. For example, those in rural areas have no alternative but to have a car. They have to pay motor insurance and if their premiums increase, they will suffer. That will adversely affect the less well off, if the charge impacts on the insurance payer at all.

Lastly, as the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald said, the proposal is absolutely illogical. It is not logical that we should recover money from someone who receives compensation for being injured in a road accident, regardless of his or her responsibility for the accident, but not from someone who is injured—I shall deal only with transport—in a train, shipping or aircraft accident. Ministers might say, "You do not have to be insured compulsorily to use those forms of transport", but such insurance is required for some of them.

There is, nevertheless, no logic in claiming money from those who have been compensated for a motor accident, but not from those who have been compensated for an accident at work when the employer is obligated to ensure that employees are insured, or from those who are compensated for tripping over a footpath or in a park that the local council is responsible for maintaining and when the authority is obliged to have an insurance policy.

What about climbers, sailors or—as my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) will have in mind—hang-gliders who are treated wonderfully by the national health service for injuries caused because of a choice that they have made? Although people make a choice to sail, to climb or to hang-glide, if they are injured, they will not be asked to make a contribution for their treatment. There is therefore absolutely no logic in the Bill, which is simply an ill-logical means, without principle, to gain access to a pocket of money.

Mr. Syms: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly right about aircraft accidents. A few years ago, an aircraft overshot Northolt and went on to the A40, hitting cars. In such a situation, a millionaire in a private jet would not be caught by his insurers, whereas the poor person driving his or her Ford might well be caught.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): That is wrong.

Mr. Hughes: Such examples may be wrong. However, debates on such matters should be left for the Committee stage rather than Second Reading. There will be a debate in Committee on the Bill's details, which I do not want to dwell on now. If the Bill is given a Second Reading today, as I think that it just might be, my hon. Friends will test in Committee whether the charging system proposed—if we are to have such a system—is the best one.

If we are to have such a system, the system proposed in the Bill seems to be better than the current one. It seems that flat-rate charges are better than variable ones, and that a common charging system is better than a localised one. Therefore, for as long as we shall use such a system to raise revenue for the health service, I guess that the Bill's provisions will offer the least worst option.

Ultimately, if the charges raise £100 million, it will of course be welcome—but it will hardly make a huge contribution to the health service's £45 billion budget. I only wish that the Government had proposed an overall

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review—on a basis of principle and logic—of health service charges, and not simply plucked a convenient little extra off the shelf.

5.18 pm

Mr. David Hinchliffe (Wakefield): I am very happy to support the measure, which is sensible and tidies up procedures that—as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said—have been in the system and operating since the 1930s. The system has had cross-party support, and I think that its historical and political context has been generally understood. Nevertheless, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) that the public have not fully understood the system.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle, I have had constituents raise with me their concern about charges for emergency treatment within what they perceive to be a free national health service. Many constituents are completely unaware of fees, and are shocked when a demand for fee payment is pressed on them. In each of my 11 or 12 years as an hon. Member, I have received two or three letters expressing their concerns about the system, which the Bill will sensibly amend.

I specifically welcome, for reasons that I have already given, the Bill's proposal to remove the emergency treatment fee. I welcome also the proposal on removing from national health service providers the role of collecting money. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle, I particularly welcome the Bill's proposal on returning funds to the providers who provided the treatment.

The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) asked about extending the principle of charging to other spheres. I do not think that any hon. Member has yet mentioned in the debate the contents of the Law Commission's 1996 consultation paper. It raised the possibility of a reclaiming scheme for other personal injuries for which damages are paid. As I said to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last week, in my long lost youth I played a good deal of rugby league and, as a consequence, spent a lot of time in local hospitals receiving treatment. I was well insured above the costs of any loss of time at work resulting from the injuries and made a substantial profit on each claim.

I am not suggesting backdating, but some people have asked about extending the practice to other areas, particularly those for which there is compulsory insurance. That may be tempting for the Treasury, but I urge caution, because such a scheme would depart from some important basic principles governing how our NHS has operated since its introduction in the 1940s. I am worried that extending the principle of recouping insurance payments to other areas could result in a USA-style system, which I have seen, where insurance arrangements are established for each patient before a pulse reading is taken. I am sure that we would all oppose any changes in that direction.

I have listened with great interest to the comments of the Conservatives. I am sorry that the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald has left the Chamber, because I wanted to raise some concerns about what she said, particularly the inconsistency between her arguments today and the record of the Conservative Government, who moved health provision ever more towards a USA-style system. If the Tories have a health policy, it is to move increasingly towards private insurance. She has made that clear in debates since the general election.

We should examine how the introduction of market mechanisms by the previous Government and the increased emphasis on paying for elements of health care have led to some of the problems in the national health service that the Government are trying to unravel.

I was interested in the right hon. Lady's attacks on the Government's proposals for motorists. In 1988, I served on the Standing Committee that considered the Health and Medicines Bill, which was all about introducing wider fundraising duties and powers for the national health service as part of a move towards the American-style system that the Conservatives favoured. The Tory reasoned amendment talks about burdens imposed on private motorists and complains that

"these charges will apply only to motorists".

I should like to hear the views of Opposition Front Benchers on what arose from their Act in 1988. One of the first results was the imposition of car parking charges in hospitals. In a spirit of consistency with their reasoned amendment, do the Conservatives believe that the previous Government were wrong to bring about a system that penalised people using cars when they visited hospitals? Elderly people who travel to see their loved ones in hospital have to pay to park at that hospital.

Mr. Randall: Many hospitals, including that in my constituency, have tokens for those who are genuinely visiting the hospital or staying there. We had a problem at Hillingdon hospital with people parking for free and going into town, depriving others of the use of the car park. There is a way of getting around the problem.

Mr. Hinchliffe: That may be the case, but it seems inconsistent that the Opposition have tabled a reasoned amendment and made remarks bashing the motorist when the previous Government—the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald was a Minister at the time—introduced hospital parking charges.

I now turn to another issue which also resulted from the policies of the previous Government. My constituency received national attention when the general manager of Wakefield health authority received from the Conservatives the national prize for innovation for introducing a remarkable scheme under the Health and Medicines Act 1988 which earned the NHS £10 a head—perhaps that is the wrong term. When someone was lying dead in the hospital mortuary awaiting collection by the local undertaker, for a fee of £10 the mortuary attendants would measure the corpse to ensure that the undertaker arrived with the correct-size coffin. That cost was passed on to the bereaved relatives—yet another charge that the right hon. Lady has conveniently forgotten, but one that gained Wakefield something of a reputation shortly after the introduction of the Health and Medicines Act.

The Conservatives also presided over the total privatisation of care of the elderly in private nursing homes and care homes. People ended up paying for services that they had previously received free from the NHS. Those charges impacted on the most vulnerable

people—as do the increasing charges for domiciliary care and the anomalies that persist today as a consequence of those charges.

I welcome the Government's resistance to calls for more charging and their response to the direction that the previous Conservative Administration were taking. I welcome my right hon. Friend's arguments against charging for GP consultations and hotel prices for NHS beds and the steps that he is taking to return the NHS to its basic principles. In particular, I welcome the massive sum of money that he and his colleagues have obtained from the Treasury; it is having an impact in my constituency and throughout the country.

5.27 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): In giving the Bill a Second Reading, the House will not be introducing a new principle of NHS funding; rather, the Bill will ensure that the NHS entitlement to recover its costs for treating accident victims, which is already enshrined in law, is achieved more readily.

The NHS is currently entitled to recover the costs of treating the casualties of road traffic accidents. The difficulty has been that, to date, it has not been very successful in doing so. The Bill will attempt to change the position by shifting to insurance companies the responsibility for making payments to the relevant trust or hospital.

According to Department of Health figures produced last July, NHS trusts recovered £13.7 million from insurance companies during the financial year 1995–96. Estimates as to the sums that could have been recovered vary hugely. The Department has estimated that around £50 million could have been claimed, whereas the Automobile Association claims that the figure could be as high as £400 million.

During the financial year 1996–97, 190 trusts out of a total of 429 claimed back absolutely nothing from the insurance industry. To illustrate the diversity of claims being made, during 1996–97 the Leicester Royal infirmary raised £365,000, but Guy's and St. Thomas's Hospital NHS trust raised only £15,000 and Derby City hospital raised absolutely nothing.

It would seem that, in the light of those figures, the NHS could begin to recover fairly large sums of money previously left unclaimed. It would be helpful if the Minister would enlighten the House on the difference between the estimated sums that are not claimed, in order to give the House a realistic idea of the scale of the problem.

One reason for the apparent failure of trusts to reclaim money from the insurance companies is the perception that the current system is bureaucratic and legally complex. A Department of Health circular has advised NHS trusts to consider more carefully how they pursue claims under the Road Traffic Act 1988. Perhaps the Minister will shed some light on how far that misperception has been corrected through more rigorous enforcement of current guidelines. What improvements resulted from the circular?

Under the Bill, the Secretary of State will issue certificates to the insurance companies specifying the NHS charges that are due. The responsibility will be delegated to the Department of Social Security's compensation recovery unit. The certification scheme, which is outlined in clauses 2 and 3, is designed to be as similar as possible to current schemes involving the unit and the insurance industry. The aim is to make the new scheme's introduction cheaper and easier, but will the Minister provide us with any Department of Health figures on the estimated costs and say what alternatives have been considered?

The initial response to the Bill has been relatively muted. The two parties that will most obviously be affected—the NHS and the insurance industry—have had different reactions to it. In the NHS, there has been a slightly different emphasis, depending on to whom one speaks. The NHS Confederation has welcomed the Bill as a way for hospitals cost-effectively to recover the money to which they are entitled, whereas the British Medical Association doctor-patient partnership and members of the Royal College of Nursing have expressed concerns about the knock-on effect on NHS funding. There are fears that the Bill will provide a precedent whereby the door is open to fund other areas of health care through insurance schemes for health-damaging life styles—from the heavy drinker to those who indulge in dangerous sports.

It is not clear why the victims of road traffic accidents should be singled out. What about any other injured individual who makes an insurance claim after receiving medical treatment? Why should the victim of a road traffic accident be the focus of recovering moneys from the insurance industry when others are immune? It would be of great interest if the Government would say what view they take on that difficulty and whether they have plans to extend the Bill's principle to funding for other areas of healthcare. I am sure that, even on road traffic accidents, the Government acknowledge that road users other than car drivers are involved in or even cause accidents. Are there plans, for example, to extend the system to compulsory insurance for cyclists or pedestrians? That is a genuine matter of debate, although I would not particularly welcome any such extension of the scheme.

On the Bill's implications for the insurance industry and the motorist, the Automobile Association has estimated that the increase in premiums for drivers will be higher than the Department of Health has said. The Government have produced a figure of between £6 and £9, whereas the AA has put it at nearer £10 on the average motor policy.

Mr. Dobson: For the record, the Association of British Insurers has estimated that, if the full costs are passed on to motorists, there will be a 2 to 3 per cent. increase—between £6 and £9—in the price of a policy. I assume that the ABI knows more about the matter than the Automobile Association does, as its members will have to pay.

Mr. Randall: I am grateful for the Secretary of State's intervention and his dismissal of the Automobile Association's opinion. In fact, the ABI has cited an amount as great as £20 on motorists' premiums. If there were less of a discrepancy between the estimates, that would help us to make up our minds about the Bill. The motorist will be hard pressed by a range of new charges from the integrated transport policy, in addition to the

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increased costs proposed by the Bill. The motorist does not want further large increases in premiums on top of everything else.

Rebecca Hadley of the AA has said:

"Britain's estimated one to two million uninsured drivers will continue to dodge the charge. It is also an unfair levy: if you fall off a ladder while cutting your hedge, the hospital would provide treatment without claiming the cost from your home insurance, so why are motorists singled out, yet again, to pick up the tab?"

In light of the AA's comment on the number of uninsured drivers on the roads, it would be helpful if the Minister would tell us what discussions he has had with the Home Office about reducing the number of uninsured drivers who continue to exploit the situation. If the Bill achieves its aim, dealing with that problem will become more of a priority.

The Bill aims to make the current way of recovering money from insurance companies for traffic accidents easier and more efficient. However, the Government must say in more detail how much money the Bill will save for the NHS. How much will it cost to implement? What guarantees can be given about not extending the principle to other areas of funding? What will be the effects on the ordinary driver? What is proposed for all those on our roads who are driving without insurance?

Principally, I am asking the Government why attacking the motorist once again is their priority. Without answers to those fundamental questions, I am afraid that I cannot support the Bill.

5.38 pm

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): I would like to take this opportunity to describe my experience of the existing legislation. Let me take the House back to a snowy January morning in 1996, when I was driving my fairly new car—a spanking red car that was only two months old—near Brechin and Arbroath as I was going to work. It was a snowy morning with a lot of black ice. Water had been running across the road and had frozen. I was tentatively driving up a narrow, winding back road—taking my time because I knew of the dangers of the road. It was a classic accident spot.

Imagine my shock and horror when I saw another driver come around the corner towards me. I could see the fear and alarm on her face, and it was obvious that her car had hit a piece of black ice. I do not know whether anyone in the House has been in the situation where an accident is about to happen, but it happens in slow motion. I could see the expression on her face as her car slid across the road. She would quite happily gone off the road and into some trees, but I happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Before the impact, my last thought was, "My nice new car!" There was nowhere for me to go as her car ploughed straight into the side of my car.

I was lucky—I had my mobile phone and I quickly dialled 999 to report the accident. Before long, an ambulance was there to cart me off to hospital. It was an occasion when it was quite good that I was in a wheelchair because, in standing on my brakes to try to stop the accident, I had done something to one of my feet. It had swollen; possibly a bone was broken—I did not know. I got my wheelchair out of the car and got myself into it. By the time the ambulance had arrived, I was mobile, but obviously something was fairly seriously wrong. Also, I had broken my sternum from wearing the seat belt. The ambulance took me to the local hospital, Stracathro hospital, where I was patched up and duly dispatched home.

At this point, I was glad that I had ticked the small box on my insurance form that ensured that I would have legal representation should I have an accident. The insurance company appointed a lawyer, who went into action on my behalf to claim some personal injury compensation.

I was able to claim a small amount to compensate for my pain and suffering, but I also had to claim back my wages for the two days for which I had been off work, despite the fact that my employer would have paid my wages in any case. As a teacher working for a local authority, I was covered by all the normal statutory sick pay arrangements, but because I was claiming personal injury compensation, my employer expected recompense for the two days' work that he did not get from me.

I expected to have to claim something to pay for hospital bills, but it did not happen. I had that expectation because, 20 years earlier, I had had another accident. I do not want hon. Members to think that I make a habit of having accidents. It was a snowy evening in March, and on this occasion I was driving down a road in Dundee when someone came out of a side road, tried to brake, did not stop and came straight across my path—another example of my being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I was collected by an ambulance and taken to the Dundee royal infirmary.

After that earlier accident, a bill arrived at my house, which I thought was to cover the cost of the ambulance. I have learnt only this afternoon, by listening to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, that the bill was not for the ambulance. I remember feeling alarmed that I had to pay for the ambulance, until someone told me that the bill would be met by the other person's insurance.

Therein lies the problem: two different health authorities, and two almost identical accidents, but in one I—or the insurance company of the person who caused the accident—was not charged, while in the other a charge was made. That is the anomaly that the Bill will put right. The power already exists, and is exercised in some areas, to charge for hospital treatment resulting from an accident; but it is used sporadically and inconsistently. It is used by some health authorities on some occasions and by others not at all.

What is the point of legislation if it cannot be enforced and the money cannot be recouped? That is why I welcome the Bill. It will make the recovery of costs much easier and there will be much greater consistency. It is different from existing legislation because of the compensation recovery unit, which will take the responsibility for recouping the money for the hospital out of the hands of the individual and put it squarely on the shoulders of the insurance companies. The law will be more coherent and therefore much better.

I welcome the Bill because it will create a much fairer system. It will apply to everyone equally and I hope that, as a result, the health service will continue to be able to put extra resources in the areas of greatest need, improving accident and emergency treatment, modernising the equipment in ambulances and reinvesting funds in the health service to make it the jewel in the crown that makes us so proud to be British.

5.44 pm

Mr. Robert Syms (Poole): In such an interesting debate on the subject of charging in the national health service, one can confidently predict that each side will accuse the other of being inconsistent. On both the Government and the Opposition Benches we have a history of arguing certain cases. Car parking charges are one of the topics that have already been mentioned. Consistency may not ring out from either side of the Chamber tonight.

Regardless of the existing law, the NHS charges have not been collected. If the Bill introduces a more efficient collection system, motorists will ultimately have to pay via their insurance companies. In effect, the Bill brings about an indirect tax rise, against the background of major increases in motoring costs initiated by the Government, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) argued.

Everyone contributes to the NHS through general taxation. Motorists will, in effect, be charged twice. Having paid through general taxation, they will be expected to pay again through their insurance. It is estimated that the Government's proposals will cost motorists an extra £10 a year in increased premiums. Seen in the context of £9 billion of extra motoring taxes, it is clear that many motorists will find the additional cost difficult to meet.

During the debate, the Opposition will seek assurances that the proposals are not the thin end of Labour's charging wedge. It is easy to claim that increased charges are justified in one part of the NHS, but good arguments can be made for higher charges for other NHS services.

The Bill has implications for bureaucracy. Additional money may well be raised, but that will entail costs, as 50 people will be employed in the collection unit.

Insurance premiums will rise by about £9 a year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) noted, the Automobile Association estimates a £10 increase, but that remains to be seen. The fact that costs will be absorbed by the Motor Insurers Bureau means that the uninsured may be paid for by the insured. That is not compatible with natural justice. Higher insurance premiums are hardly likely to increase the number of motorists who take out insurance. The Association of British Insurers estimates that uninsured drivers will cost motorists £250 million in 1999. The Bill could increase that sum substantially.

Many motorists' costs are paid by businesses, so business costs will rise. There are 1.6 million company cars. The additional burden on business will have to be financed from trading.

The charges could be judged to be an unfair levy. Motoring in the United Kingdom is already more expensive than elsewhere in Europe.

Anomalies will inevitably arise, and perhaps the Minister will respond on this point at the end of the debate. I mentioned earlier the example of an aircraft careering off a runway into a road. If someone falls off a ladder in his home, there would not necessarily be a claim against his home insurance. The case of cyclists has been mentioned. Other examples are that of a ferry sinking or a train or aircraft crashing.

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): Aircraft and shipping accidents are covered by international conventions, so a Government could not legislate for those cases, even if they wanted to do so. The Athens convention deals with shipping accidents and the Warsaw convention with aircraft accidents.

Mr. Syms: The hon. Gentleman makes an interesting point. I am sure that such issues will be explored more fully in Standing Committee, on which I may volunteer to serve. The Bill creates a regressive tax without regard for whether someone is rich or poor. Indeed, some poorer households pay rather more of their income in insurance than do some richer households.

The Bill also raises questions about the future funding of the national health service. If we introduce the principle that motorists should contribute through their insurance companies, we shall have to deal with arguments about why that should not be so for smokers, drinkers or the overweight. Self-inflicted injury has been mentioned. Those who take part in dangerous sports might also be affected. We must address the anomaly of having a charge for motorists—probably because there is already a substantial insurance market which can be tapped—while there is no charge in other areas. There is also concern about extra bureaucracy.

Ms Drown: Did the previous Government point out that anomaly during discussion on the Road Traffic Bill in 1988? Can the hon. Gentleman distinguish between the compulsory insurance required by people who drive cars and non-compulsory insurance, which applies to some of his other examples?

Mr. Syms: The hon. Lady makes a good point. Motoring insurance is compulsory, although not everyone takes it out. A number of people caught in accidents are not in fact insured, and one of my problems with the Bill is that it fails to address that situation. The burden will fall on law-abiding citizens who conform to rules, regulations and laws, and who may have to pick up the tab for the bad apples who are uninsured.

The principle of insuring oneself for certain activities is recognised. People take out insurance for various sports.

Miss Begg: Will the hon. Gentleman clarify whether he is suggesting that, because some people break the law by not taking out compulsory insurance, we should not accept the Bill?

Mr. Syms: I am not suggesting that; I am merely saying that it is a fact of life that many people who should be covered by motor insurance are not covered. Under the Bill, the Motor Insurers Bureau run by the insurance companies will have to cover claims for those people who have not done their duty.

Miss Begg: Should we, then, frame legislation to take account of those who break the law or do not fulfil their obligations? Is that what the hon. Gentleman is saying?

Mr. Syms: No, that is not my point. Many people are insured. The Government's proposals will hit law-abiding citizens, who have already been hit by increased motoring taxes, including an increase in fuel taxes. The Bill does nothing to deal with uninsured drivers, and we should put

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more emphasis on making sure that they are insured, and on punishing them if they are not. I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House will agree with that.

My more general point is that to argue for the principle that drivers should pay through their insurance—compulsory or otherwise—is to set off on the slippery slope of arguing the same for other, more voluntary, activities. In rural areas, people need cars, and most Members of Parliament need cars to conduct our business.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): May I bring the hon. Gentleman back to the point made by the hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) about great variations in the amounts that hospitals claim? The reason suggested was the complexity of the process. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Bill is excellent, in that it will simplify the process and help to eliminate variations in what is claimed around the country?

Mr. Syms: We shall have to test that point in Committee to see whether the Government's intentions—with some of which I agree—will have the planned results. Aspects of the Bill are positive, but many questions will be raised as the Bill progresses. There are concerns about the precedent being set, which may affect other areas. As a Conservative, I believe that the NHS must be basically free and paid out of national taxation. Income can be supplemented in one or two ways, but we all know that there is no effective way to pick up the NHS bill, except through general taxation.

5.55 pm

Laura Moffatt (Crawley): There will be a huge cheer throughout national health service trusts today when staff learn that the Bill has set off on its passage. Anyone in the NHS who has had to collect the £21.30 charge will tell hon. Members what nonsense that was. The Bill only makes possible what should have happened already. It contains nothing new, and it breaks no principles. Anyone who claims that a new principle is being introduced is neither right nor honest.

Is it reasonable to expect hard-pressed NHS staff to chase small sums? Those staff become completely disillusioned, dropping the chase when they have had enough. My local trust serves part of the M25, and it has to deal with lots of accidents, but it raised only £70,000 last year from the charge. Two people had to be dedicated to collecting small sums, and they were driven into the ground and became fed up. It is little wonder that some trusts paid heed to companies that offered to collect the debts, raising cash for the trusts, but taking a cut for themselves. That is clearly unacceptable.

However, matters are even worse than that. Some companies offer to look into the people involved in accidents, and then to organise retrospective insurance. The company then gets a cut for the hospital, and for the person who is making the claim. Tacky, nasty arrangements are being made over funds that should by right go to the NHS. I am glad to see the back of all that, and I look forward to putting a stop to companies making money from a difficult situation.

Charging should be in the hands of people who know what they are doing. The compensation recovery unit is used to dealing with such matters.

Mr. Letwin: How successful has the compensation recovery unit been? What percentage of claims sought over the past five years has the unit managed to obtain?

Laura Moffatt: Clearly, I am not able to answer that. I can answer only for constituents who have experienced the work of the compensation recovery unit, and who have had no complaint about the ways in which they were asked to pay back benefit that they had received while waiting for claims to be resolved.

The compensation recovery unit is used to dealing with such matters. I hope that patients and hospitals will see little evidence of administration, and that the emotive subject of money need not be raised with people at difficult times. I trained as a nurse with my local trust, and I worked in the accident and emergency department, in which everyone had an opportunity to work, both during and after my training. It is awful to have to tell a patient that he or she may be charged a levy, and that we need a name and address so that we can make the charge. False names and addresses are still given to hospital staff, and that is clearly unacceptable.

The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) mentioned the response of the Royal College of Nursing. I was interested to hear the hon. Gentleman say that the royal college was concerned, as it very much welcomes these moves. It produced two pages welcoming what the Government are trying to do, and its one small word of warning concerned ensuring that the principles were not taken further, which would be my warning too. I can support the measure only because compulsory insurance is involved, and I support it wholeheartedly. We will stick to that principle. The Royal College of Nursing, as a caring organisation, is right to say that we must be sensitive when we are claiming money from people who have been involved in difficult and horrible situations. I do not want the principle to be extended to other accidents.

I listened with interest when my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) talked about insurance and said that he would be covered if he had an accident. That would not be true of my three sons, who play for Crawley rugby club. The club encourages a sporting activity that enables our young people to join in, have great fun and keep fit. The last thing that I want is to cause them difficulty. The principle must rest there; it would not be acceptable to take it further.

I support the Bill because motor insurance is compulsory and the money will go back to the NHS, as it so rightly deserves. As a nurse in the NHS for 25 years, I have been waiting for such a measure. Staff are involved in issues with which they do not feel comfortable. The Government say that they will do something about that. They will ensure that staff do not have to be involved and that the NHS merely needs to know the names, addresses and types of treatment that have been given in a hospital. They will take the matter out of the nurses' hands, which will clearly be music to the ears of people who work in the NHS throughout the land.

Mr. Randall: Given the hon. Lady's experience as a nurse, does she think that the measure will involve more paperwork for nursing staff?

Laura Moffatt: I can envisage only a reduction in paperwork. The hon. Gentleman should speak to those working in his local trust. In mine, two people have to spend most of their day chasing small sums. There will be a great reduction in the amount of paperwork. The job will be done elsewhere, by people who are used to doing it, which seems to be the only way forward.

Mr. Randall: I thank the hon. Lady for giving way again. She is most kind. With respect, I accept, as I said in my speech, that the money that trusts get back varies greatly. Under the Bill, will there have to be paperwork for all, or nearly all, patients who have been involved in a road traffic accident—paperwork that will have to be sent to the central collection point?

Laura Moffatt: Perhaps the hon. Gentleman has not noticed, but there is paperwork when most patients are admitted to an accident and emergency department. That work has to be done—there is no question about it—and it is the way in which it is done that matters. Another authority will deal with it further and the staff will be relieved when they hear that they will no longer have to pursue claims. The Bill is about bringing fairness back into the system. If a Labour Government are about anything, they are about fairness. Military hospitals have been included in the provisions of the Bill and will now be able to claim money. They will get the money that is due to them.

The Bill is a fitting tribute and a fitting approach to the national health service in its 50th year. I am glad that the Labour Government are taking us along that path and ensuring that the NHS gets the money that it so rightly deserves. NHS staff throughout the country will be grateful.

6.7 pm

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): With your eagle eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, you will have noticed that I have been translated not merely from the Front to the Back Bench—I hope temporarily, for the purposes of this debate—but to the very Back Bench, as I would not want my remarks to constrain or embarrass my right hon. and hon. Friends on the Opposition Front Bench in any way.

I must begin by admitting that I am becoming something of a "Dobsonist", or perhaps, a "Dobsonite". I am startled by the magisterial way in which the Secretary of State is gradually building the case for the privatisation of the national health service—a case that he and his colleagues spent their time in opposition explaining that they regarded as an abomination.

When I was new to the House, my first parliamentary question was to the Secretary of State. I wanted to know whether he recognised that, in the first measure proposed by the Government for the NHS, he was paving the way for the privatisation of clinical services. The right hon. Gentleman, with his usual charm, grinned slightly and evaded the question wholly, since when it has become evident in the popular press and elsewhere that that was indeed the tenor of the measure concerned.

The Bill was presented as entirely uninteresting by the Secretary of State, who went out of his way to diminish the interest and importance of his own measure. I have not been long in the House, but I cannot recall an occasion on which a Secretary of State made so brief and so low-toned a speech on Second Reading—a speech so calculated to induce silence, and possibly sleep, on the Benches behind and opposite him. He intended to put us to sleep so that we should be pleasantly anaesthetised, to use a health service metaphor, and should not notice that there was anything remotely interesting in this legislation.

Ms Drown: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that the Bill is relatively simple and involves simple principles? Is my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State not to be highly commended for not speaking longer than necessary, since we have many matters to discuss in the House?

Mr. Letwin: As I said at the beginning of my speech, I am increasingly an admirer of the Secretary of State and I certainly do not want my remarks to be taken as an accusation against his acumen. I hope that by the end of my speech, the hon. Lady may be persuaded that, although the Bill is simple in the sense that it is short, it does not by any means involve simple principles. In fact, it probably involves the most subtle principle to be connected with the NHS and it constitutes one of the more important measures to come before the House this Session, as will probably come to light gradually in the next five, 10 or 20 years.

I shall explain. The fundamental question about health payment—not the administration of the NHS or the way in which people are cured—which has been a vexed political issue for almost half a century, is not whether there should be charges at the point of use. No major political party has advocated that since the war and, in large part, no party has advocated it since the 1920s. Everyone has aimed at a health service that is free at the point of use. The great debate—sometimes open and sometimes covert, sometimes pursued intelligently and sometimes with partisan zeal and much less intelligence—has concerned whether the health service should be insurance or tax based. Members on both sides of the House will recognise that that has been the serious issue that people have pondered, debated and failed to resolve.

The measure before the House is extremely interesting. It appears to extend the tax base for payment for NHS services. It has that appearance because it so happens that under the laws governing motoring, insurance for motorists is compulsory, so Labour Members have been able to argue that this is a special case—the Secretary of State did not bother to do so, so keen was he to avoid the issue altogether—and have salved their consciences, so to speak. The hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) salved her conscience by explaining that this was a special case, quite unlike all the other cases that she did not want to see flow from it, because motoring insurance is compulsory.

Laura Moffatt: The hon. Gentleman says that we are salving our consciences by saying that because compulsory insurance is involved, the Bill is easy to justify. Can he cite any other compulsory personal insurances in the United Kingdom that might relate to the Bill?

Mr. Letwin: No, but I fear that I will alarm the hon. Lady a little by explaining that the distinction that she has erected will be subject to an onslaught from the Secretary of State.

Mr. Duncan: I suggest that my hon. Friend start his list with employer liability and local authority liability.

Mr. Letwin: With his customary acuity, my hon. Friend is right. There are other such cases, but my argument goes well beyond the cases where there is already compulsion.

[Mr. Letwin]

The hon. Member for Crawley argues that this is a special case. My hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) pointed out that it is not so special, but there is a restricted set of cases that involve compulsory insurance. Labour Members have effectively argued that compulsory insurance schemes through which the NHS seeks to recover its costs from insurers are de facto taxes. This is another sort of tax, but one that happens not to pass into the Consolidated Fund but directly to the NHS, if that is indeed the case; I plead ignorance on the point. I find it a little odd in terms of Treasury theology that it should be so designated but perhaps it is. If so, it is all the more interesting because that would suggest that it is not quite a tax. If it were seen by the Treasury as a tax, it would enter the Consolidated Fund. The Treasury therefore regards it as a charge, but the hon. Member for Crawley and others would argue that it is a de facto tax because it is raised from an insurance company in a case where the insurance is compulsory.

The problem with that line of argument from the Government's point of view is striking because we must ask why compulsory insurance is applied only in a very select group of cases, in particular, motoring and the two others that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton mentioned. Why is compulsory insurance so restricted in its application? The answer is that it happens by historical accident to be rather restricted. Now enters upon the scene the majestic figure of the Secretary of State, with his logic and his needs.

The Secretary of State intends to pile large sums that the Chancellor of the Exchequer does not have, and will have less of in due course, into the NHS. He argues—and has introduced a Bill to this effect—that it is legitimate for the NHS to charge the insurers of people who suffer from accidents the cost of caring for them because the insurance involved is compulsory. It is at that point that he will ask the Home Secretary to do something that is perfectly rational under that rubric or logic—to expand the scope of compulsory insurance.

It is rational to propose that anyone engaging in an activity with a high chance of leading to medical care costs should by compulsion be insured. It is rational because it covers a social inequity. If they are honest, Labour Members will admit that as much as would Conservative Members. It is equitable to suggest that people who decide to do something dangerous should not impose additional costs on the rest of the community. It follows that if the Secretary of State believes that the right way for the NHS to recapture the costs from the right people is to make insurance compulsory, the Government will argue for making such insurance compulsory for a wide range of activities.

The more I think about the matter, the less I can see the slightest objection on the part of the Government to the widening of compulsory insurance. Some Conservative Members would object to a vast widening of compulsory insurance on libertarian grounds. It may well be that my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton would, because he is one of the most noted of the libertarian tendency of Conservative Members—perhaps its most distinguished exponent in print. Among Labour Members, I see no libertarians. I have heard no such logic or rhetoric from them so far, and do not expect to hear any before the Government's period in office ends, to suggest any objection to a vast application of compulsory insurance across a wide range of activities.

Such a course would be consonant with Ministers' desperate efforts to prevent people from killing themselves by smoking. The Government specialise in trying to deal with what they regard as the problem of individuals taking risks that they should not take. Why else spend large amounts of public money trying to persuade people not to smoke? Why else does the Minister for Public Health spend her time circulating the heads of the royal colleges and desperately assuring them that the single most important thing in the health service is preventing people from smoking? Why would it not be a natural extension from that to get the Secretary of State to agree to something that would be introduced as an unimportant, obvious little Bill to which we need not pay much attention, and would create a compulsory insurance scheme for smokers? Labour Members could argue that, de facto, it was a tax if the NHS could recover the cost of cancer treatment from a compulsory insurance scheme for people who smoke. I believe that treating cancer is one of the major costs of the NHS, although I am not an expert. That logic could be extended across a vast range of activities.

Mr. Hugh Bayley (City of York): Where is the evidence?

Mr. Letwin: The hon. Gentleman asks where the evidence is. We have an interesting dialectic here, similar to that which we find in relation to the European Union. First, we get an unimportant little measure about which we are told not to worry. Secondly, there is an accusation that it may lead to greater things. Third comes the riposte, "Where is the evidence?" Then, it comes true and we are told, "Goodness me, you must have noticed that at the beginning." I fear that what I am describing is a logic, and logic is powerful. Even in this Government, it captures people.

Ms Drown: I might accept that this could be the start of a huge, fantastical operation by the Government if the Bill proposed new charges, but it does not. The charges have been in place since 1930. Given that and the fact the hon. Gentleman's Government in 1988 discussed the matter and reinforced the charges, he is on very weak ground.

Mr. Letwin: That is the brilliance—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. This is not an abstract debate but one on the Second Reading of the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill. It would be helpful to hear a little more about that. The hon. Gentleman has travelled rather far from the core of the subject.

Mr. Letwin: I stand corrected and shall swiftly bring my remarks back to the Bill, but the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) illustrates the brilliance, power and subtlety of the Secretary of State's mind beautifully. He has chosen a case in which he can argue that he is not even doing what he is doing. By vastly increasing the take in circumstances where he can find an ancient peg, he can argue that the Bill is not a Bill at all but merely a tidying-up. There were moments in his

speech when I doubted that he was introducing a Bill because he seemed to be talking about an administrative measure that would not have required parliamentary approval.

The Secretary of State is, of course, making a major change. He is introducing legislation; he is occupying the time of the House to go through First Reading, Second Reading and so forth precisely because he is trying to raise a large amount of money. He is doing something that will have an impact in precedent. We may hardly believe it any more, but legislation passed by the House is important in the development of the way in which people think about the subject of the legislation. If legislation is introduced about the NHS that has the effect of raising a large extra sum from insurance, the logic that I describe becomes all too easy to apply.

To move back to the remarks that I was making before I gave way—but very much in the context of the Bill, Mr. Deputy Speaker—I want to argue that the extension of compulsory insurance under the Bill is a major conceptual change in the allocation of NHS payment and funding. Ultimately, every activity carries risk. The mere act of breathing is risky. Compulsory insurance could easily be widened to the point at which it covers all the costs of the NHS. The Secretary of State knows that; his officials know that; his Ministers know that. If and when the Secretary of State begins to build what I suspect he privately intends to build on the basis of this measure, Labour Members will be surprised to find that this little, apparently unimportant Bill was a paving Bill in the most exceptional sense—a conceptual paving Bill.

The Bill is reminiscent of much else that the Government are doing. In many cases, they are slowly beginning to persuade members of their own party to accept vast changes to positions held only by the Conservative party before now by persuading them to accept things that are apparently innocuous. I fear that Labour Members have illustrated beautifully this afternoon exactly the tendency that the Secretary of State hoped that they would illustrate, namely, the tendency not even to notice that there lies within the Bill the seeds of something that they at present do not wish to see grow into a tree.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: I have been struggling to follow the logic of the hon. Gentleman's argument. He now says that the Bill is some sort of paving device for new charges. Although he was not a Member of Parliament at the time, I am sure that he supported the Road Traffic Act 1988. Why was that not the paving Bill for wider charges?

Mr. Letwin: I cannot be said to have supported the 1988 Bill because I had no idea that it existed. Had I been a Member of Parliament, I might or might not have supported it. The reason why it is perfectly appropriate that my right hon. and hon. Friends should have tabled a reasoned amendment this afternoon is not that the Bill is in principle objectionable, but that the explanation that has been given of it and the logic that has been advanced as lying behind it are wholly beside the point. The truth has not been brought out. It is the role of the Opposition to oppose that which they need to oppose and to bring out the real character of measures.

I believe that the real purpose of the debate this afternoon is precisely to illustrate to the public that the Bill has far wider implications than has been admitted to them and that the Bill has been defended on a basis that is not open or honest with them. It falls to the Government to admit what lies behind the Bill. Then perhaps in later stages, Labour Members may have their own doubts about the wisdom of this measure, even if Opposition Members have, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) said, some sympathy with the principle.

6.24 pm

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): In following the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), it might be helpful if I bring the House back to reality. Although his speech was interesting, and perhaps it used up some useful time of the House, it has not been useful in making progress on the Bill.

I am disappointed that the Opposition do not support the Bill, but perhaps it serves as a useful example of the difference in priorities between the political parties. While the Labour Government believe that the NHS should get the funds to which it is entitled, the Conservative party seems more concerned about letting insurance companies off the charges that they have been set up to cover. Other Opposition Members seem more concerned to discuss the philosophical purities of differing charging regimes.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who is not in his place, suggested that £100 million was not a lot out of the £40 billion that the NHS needs every year. I suggest that £100 million can make an awful lot of difference to the NHS. If the hon. Gentleman does not want that money for his constituency, I can guarantee him that my constituents could well use the money for their health services.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The hon. Lady must accept either that a significant amount would be saved which could replace money raised from income tax for the NHS or that too little would be raised to re-establish the principle—I take the point that the Bill re-establishes something that has already been legislated for—that patients should pay towards their care. In our reasoned amendment, however, the Liberal Democrats propose as a fairer way of funding the NHS in general than through patient charges.

Ms Drown: I do not accept that. I see the charges as money to which the NHS is entitled and has been entitled since 1930, when the legislation was first introduced. The NHS has not been collecting all that money, but the Government are setting up the proper administrative arrangements to ensure that the money goes to where it is needed in the NHS.

I am pleased to be able to speak on the Bill because I am one of the few people in the House who has personal experience of managing the existing system under which the NHS can reclaim from insurance companies some of the costs of treating people who have been injured in road traffic accidents. My brief experience was instructive and I remember it well. Two things stand out in my memory and both of them lead me to welcome the Bill.

First, I remember how inappropriate it seemed to visit the accident and emergency department as an administrator, trying to establish which of our patients were there as a result of a road traffic accident and which had been injured in other ways in order to set up the appropriate paperwork

[Ms Drown]

for road traffic accident victims. The other hospital staff were rightly concentrating on giving their patients the best clinical care that they could; neither patients nor staff wanted to be disturbed at that time by what they saw, reasonably, in my view, as intrusive bureaucracy. The existing system for reclaiming the treatment costs of road accident victims makes such intrusion inevitable by putting the onus on the hospital to establish not only which of their patients have been injured in road accidents but a series of details about the accident.

The principle that the NHS should be able to reclaim some of the costs of providing medical treatment to people injured in road accidents is well established. The Road Traffic Act 1930 introduced the charges, which have been levied since 1934. Motorists are covered by their insurance for those costs yet those charges are little understood by motorists or even Members of Parliament. Motorists are compulsorily insured, and that creates a distinction between the charges set up in 1930 and other possible charges that have been mentioned by right hon. and hon. Members.

Of the charges covered by the Bill, the emergency treatment fee—currently £21.30—is the most unpopular as it is payable by the vehicle user in an accident regardless of who is at fault. The Government intend to abolish that charge for hospitals, and I congratulate them on that. Its abolition will be welcomed by the NHS, motorists and insurance companies alike. It makes sense for everyone involved to concentrate on the payments for out-patient and in-patient treatment.

Over the past 50 years, NHS administrative staff have been trying to collect those funds—often in difficult circumstances. Staff collecting those sums have had to deal extremely sensitively with patients. It is only right that the House congratulates them and the administrative and other staff who have managed a difficult administrative system in a professional and sensitive manner. The Government's proposals would shift the onus of collecting payments from NHS hospitals to insurance companies. In doing so, those difficult situations can be avoided and more money spent on what is important—NHS care.

My second abiding memory of running the existing system is of how complicated and bureaucratic it is. I remember the forms, the checks and the chasing letters—they were almost charming in their detail. I also remember the filing cabinets and the frustration of chasing bills, in some cases for relatively small sums. The only thing missing from the overall Dickensian impression was a quill pen. I applaud the Government's determination to find a way to reclaim some of the cost of treating road accident victims that cuts the mass of paperwork in hospitals.

The difficulty of operating the current system has led many hospitals to reclaim less of the cost of treating such victims than they were entitled to under existing legislation. That inevitably means that there is less NHS money available to treat patients. The sensible way forward, of abolishing the emergency treatment fee for hospitals and properly recovering the money due for patient treatment, will let the NHS see the wood for the trees, and contrasts starkly with the actions of the previous Government, who merely introduced measures to increase the piles of paper in the NHS. I welcome the Labour Government's steps to make additional money available to the NHS and to reduce paperwork.

I have three questions about the implementation of the proposed schemes which I hope will be considered during the Bill's passage. First, there is the question of transitional arrangements. On 2 July last year, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced that steps would be taken to recover the money due to hospitals in respect of the treatment of people injured in road accidents. I understand that the new system will cover treatment given to road accident victims from that date, but if the Bill is passed, it will still be some time before guidance can be issued to hospitals and insurance companies setting out the precise details of the new system. If the Bill becomes law, I hope that the Government will make careful arrangements for cases arising between 2 July 1997 and the time when the new guidelines are issued. There will be scope for confusion and double counting in respect of such cases, so care will be needed to ensure that confusion is minimised. Some hospitals will have already billed for road accident treatment since 2 July 1997, whereas others will not. Clear guidelines are needed on who is to claim what money, from whom and when it should be claimed.

My second question relates to the nature of the records that hospitals will be expected to keep under the new system. Although I welcome the Government's aim of cutting down NHS bureaucracy by requiring insurance companies to initiate and follow through payments to hospitals, it is important that steps be taken to ensure that the new system succeeds in reducing bureaucracy. I presume that insurance companies will not simply be left to get on with the job of administering the system without checks. There will have to be incentives to ensure that the companies comply with their new duties and make all the payments they should. However, if the operation of the new system requires hospitals to keep detailed records of which of their patients have been injured in road accidents and the exact cost of their treatment, there is a risk that the new system will simply replicate the troublesome and time-consuming bureaucracy of the existing system.

Laura Moffatt: Does my hon. Friend agree that, in addition to all the difficulties with collection that she describes, there is a seven-day limit on the time in which a claim can be made, which adds to the bureaucratic nightmare suffered by administrators?

Ms Drown: The system can certainly be described as a nightmare, because of the forms and bureaucracy resulting from existing legislation. That is why I urge the Government to pay close attention to ensuring that any new system results in the NHS receiving the money to which it is entitled and in a genuine reduction in paperwork and hospital administration.

My third point relates to the fact that the Government have rightly stressed the importance of encouraging innovation in the NHS and of making the best use of hospital beds. Care in the home has been emphasised as an alternative to hospital treatment—an alternative that many patients prefer. The Bill allows the NHS to recover from insurance companies the cost of hospital treatment given to people injured in road traffic accidents. In 1930, when the Road Traffic Act was introduced, I suspect that no thought

was given to alternatives to treating people in hospital and that the emphasis on acute hospital care rather than community care was even stronger than it is now.

Given that motorists are insured for the cost of NHS treatment resulting from road accidents, should not the Bill reflect the modern reality of the NHS and allow the cost of treating road accident injuries to be charged whether treatment takes place at hospital or in the home? If that provision is not made, an incentive will remain for the NHS to treat road traffic accident patients in hospital or at out-patient clinics, instead of allowing them to be treated at home. It is illogical to say that the cost of treatment should be recoverable when that treatment is given in hospital, but not when it is given in the patient's home, for example, by a physiotherapist or district nurse. I urge the Government to examine the possibility of amending the Bill to enable the recovery of the cost of treatment given either in hospital or at home. That would be wholly appropriate given the shifts in the culture surrounding hospital and non-hospital care.

I congratulate the Government on their sensible proposal, which will be welcomed by hospital staff, both clinical and administrative. I hope that the points I have made will be addressed during the Bill's passage.

6.36 pm

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): Although Liberal Democrat Members found the principle of the Bill quite attractive and were tempted to support it on Second Reading, and various minor parts of it in Committee and at later stages, we have set out our objections to the principles behind the Bill in a reasoned amendment.

We welcome certain of the Bill's provisions, such as the abolition of the emergency treatment charge, which was, and is perceived as being bureaucratic and upsetting to many patients. However, we have serious concerns about some of the principles that the Bill reflects or that it re-establishes from existing legislation, which overcome the advantages contained in those welcome provisions.

Our amendment states our concern that the Bill

"makes provision for requiring those who successfully claim compensation for personal injury sustained in road traffic accidents, but not by any other means",

with the result that the measure appears to operate in a vacuum. We should be grateful if the Government gave a clear statement of the principles behind the way in which they want to treat co-payment and patient charges. Secondly, the Bill

"proposes no coherent policy for raising or reforming NHS charges or for making them fair".

We still await detailed clarification of whether the Government believe that current prescription charges, as an example of co-payment, are fair in their operation; whether there are any proposals to make them fairer; and what is the future of those sort of co-payments.

Our third objection is that the Bill

"moves public policy and practice further away from the principle of paying for the NHS from general taxation".

That point has been made by hon. Members on both sides of the House, in particular by the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe). Later in my speech, I shall return to the points he made. Our fourth concern is that the Bill

"contains no mechanism for protecting those on low incomes against increased insurance costs"—

small though those compulsory insurance costs may be. Finally, we are concerned about the fact that the Bill

"adds to bureaucracy without any sufficient compensatory benefit."

Such compensatory benefit would include clarification of some of the areas I have mentioned.

Our approach must be contrasted with that of the Conservatives. We can see from their reasoned amendment that much of their opposition to the Bill—apart from the Oppositionitis from which they are suffering—relates to their love of the motor car. The Opposition's reference to the motorist in their reasoned amendment might suggest that their love of the motor car is at least as great as, if not greater than, their love of the principles upon which the NHS was founded. I shall take this opportunity to explain our concerns about how the legislation may affect NHS founding principles.

We accept that, although the Bill does not introduce a new principle, it re-establishes an existing one. The Government had the opportunity in this Bill to abolish both the charges that apply to road traffic accident patients, but chose to abolish only one. Therefore, it is impossible for the Government to ignore the fact that they are re-establishing a principle that they had the opportunity to remove.

That principle which they have chosen to retain is that income for the NHS can be raised from patients. My hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) expressed concern about that matter earlier. The Secretary of State admitted that there will be an increase in the cost of motor insurance. Estimates of that increase range from £10—the figure suggested by the Opposition—to a lesser figure favoured by the Government. I am sure that if their own estimates were revised upwards the Government would opt for talking of an increase of £9.99, rather than £10, in the interests of good public relations.

That insurance increment is regressive as it will be compulsory and will generally have no regard for the income of the person seeking to take out car insurance. Everyone will be affected equally. That is not the case with the current main source of revenue for the NHS: income taxation. We believe that the principle of fairness should be upheld in all NHS policy. That is why we are concerned about the perpetual increases in prescription charges and why we went to the election calling for a freeze in those charges prior to a review. The current system has a regressive effect at the margins for those who just fail to qualify for exemption from prescription charges.

We are also concerned about where the process will end. Some hon. Members have tried to make reassuring comments, but we are not convinced. If the charge is restricted to compulsory insurance, it will not apply to injuries incurred during sporting activities where there is no compulsory insurance. My hon. Friend the Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey asked whether the Government will soon introduce legislation to recover charges arising from employer liability—which is compulsory in many areas—as a result of industrial accidents; or from local authority liability that currently applies to injuries incurred through the negligence of local authorities.

[Dr. Evan Harris]

A further example comes hard on the heels of the interesting and thought-provoking speech by the hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown). If the key issue is that insurance is compulsory, what will happen to those with compulsory buildings or insurance for mortgages? What will prevent the Government from introducing legislation to charge the victims of house fires, through their buildings insurance, for the cost of expensive burns treatment? The Liberal Democrats will not be satisfied until the Government confirm that the measure will stop at this point and not affect other forms of compulsory insurance—whether that be mortgage insurance or car insurance.

Ms Drown: The legislation refers to compulsory insurance for drivers of motor vehicles. Does the hon. Gentleman accept that the charge has been in place since 1930 and has been discussed and agreed at various times since then?

Dr. Harris: I addressed that point earlier in my speech. No one is suggesting that this is a new charge. This legislation presented an opportunity for the Government not only to re-establish those parts of the charges that they are maintaining but to take the alternative view and move away from charging patients directly. That opportunity has been missed.

Mr. Hutton: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm when his party discovered its opposition to this proposal? As I understand it, the Liberal Democrats have supported these measures previously.

Dr. Harris: My party, like the Labour party, has serious long-standing concerns about those charges. Unlike the Labour party, we demonstrated our concern in our manifesto commitment to freeze prescription charges. The Labour party did not presage in its manifesto the introduction of this legislation which will increase the average cost of car insurance. According to the Association of Community Health Councils for England and Wales and other groups, there was little consultation with patient groups about the Bill. The Government will be on shaky ground if they look to their past record both in and outside this place—particularly regarding indications of intent in party manifestos. I am grateful to the Minister for giving me the opportunity to make that point.

Anyone who is concerned about the regressive nature of the proposals, which re-establish the charges, could maintain that there are better cases than car insurance for making claims on insurance companies and making insurance compulsory. For instance, what about injuries incurred in certain sports to which the less well-off do not have easy access? I refer not to the rugby games enjoyed by the children of the hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) but to skiing, for example—which I have had neither the funds nor the courage to try for myself. I do not believe that skiing could be described as a sport that is generally enjoyed across the social classes, yet there are significant costs involved with the treatment of skiing injuries. If one were to argue that the present charge is reasonably fair, one could envisage the Government's introducing other legislation where my arguments about the regressive nature of the charges apply less.

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way again; I appreciate his courtesy. I am sure that he understands that the legislation has nothing to do with self-insurance: it is do with third party compulsory insurance.

Dr. Harris: That is a reassuring comment. I hope that the Minister will confirm that the Government will not move any further towards those sorts of schemes. However, the principle will be breached if the Government seek to raise additional funds for the health service—they make no bones about it; that is what they are doing—by increasing motor insurance when that money could be raised more fairly, transparently and less regressively through general taxation.

There has been debate, some of which I have not followed—particularly the contribution by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin)—about the nature of compulsory insurance. It has been claimed that because it is compulsory insurance, the charge is okay. That implies that people with optional insurance should not be asked to fund the health service. One can understand the moral pressure that could be brought to bear on people who were asked to contribute voluntarily to the NHS. That could cause philosophical and political problems for the Government.

However, I feel strongly about the way in which the Government have attached national lottery funds to improvements in cancer treatment. One could argue that that is not funding NHS core services—although the Government would have difficulty claiming that improved cancer care is not core to the NHS. The policy is a move away from the position adopted by my party and the Labour party in opposition that lottery funding should not be used to support NHS core services. Cancer is a particularly evocative subject for patients. Because the Government have chosen to fund cancer treatment through that indirect charge—it is the type to which we refer in our reasoned amendment—patients feel that they are somehow doing the NHS the world of good by spending money, which in many cases they do not have, on that form of gambling. Commentators have said that funding the NHS through the national lottery is another example of the rich finding ways to make the poor pay more for the services that everyone uses.

Miss Begg: The hon. Gentleman is straying from the Bill's remit. Surely the Bill's aim is to deal with the anomalies in the existing legislation which I described and to simplify the bureaucracy so that the collection of charges is fairer and easier.

Dr. Harris: I understand the hon. Lady's point and I shall listen carefully for a ruling from you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, rather than from the hon. Lady, if my remarks are not in order. My point is that the principle of co-payment of charges can extend much further than this matter and our objection on Second Reading is based on the fact that if we concede the point and support the Bill, as Government Back Benchers will, we do not know where that extension will end. I know that the Minister has been listening carefully to my remarks, and I seek

clarification on that point. In Committee, I shall take a constructive approach on my specific concerns, which I shall address later.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: Should not the hon. Gentleman view the Bill in the same way as the Government's attempt to tackle prescription fraud? The Bill aims to make an existing system work more effectively and fairly and no great new principles are being advocated, as he is suggesting.

Dr. Harris: Liberal Democrat Members are prepared to accept that the Bill will achieve greater efficiency and, by abolishing the emergency treatment charge, more fairness in the existing system. However, the point that I have already made twice—once in response to one of the hon. Gentleman's colleagues—is that by introducing the Bill the Government are re-establishing a principle that can be challenged. They could use this legislative opportunity to say that they will not fund the NHS through flat-rate increases on compulsory insurance. We have a genuine disagreement with the terms of the Bill, and it is valid to oppose it on Second Reading because of the missed opportunity to revoke that principle.

Car parking charges have also been mentioned. One can accept, as I have at my local hospital, the use of car parking charges to encourage people to use public transport and to avoid providing a free parking facility on hospital grounds for people who may have no business to park there. That is a legitimate way to level the playing field and ensure that there is no financial incentive for people to use their cars, particularly in congested areas. That is why the Liberal Democrats support a tax on employers' car parking perks, including those that apply to hon. Members.

When hospital authorities justify high charges by saying that any money raised will go to patient care, they breach the principle that patient care should be funded according to means. I see that the hon. Member for Wakefield is back in his place. He will not have heard me say that I agreed with much of what he said about the principle of sticking to general taxation for raising the bulk of NHS funding. When patient care directly benefits from people paying high car parking charges over and above those needed to control transport congestion, users of the service are being made to pay more than the average taxpayer, which I oppose. After all, on that basis one could argue that there should be a hike in canteen charges over and above what is necessary to break even so that hospitals can make a profit.

Those arguments are of relevance if this legislative opportunity to re-establish a principle is then used to open the floodgates.

It is seen to be an advantage of the Bill that the money to pay for patient care will go directly to hospitals and that the charges have been worked out on a notional basis, such that if all the money was reclaimed it would pay the hospital costs of all road traffic accidents. However, it is worrying that through direct hypothecation, an entire area of the NHS will effectively be paid for by indirect patient charges. Although that may not be the Government's intention, it sets a precedent for future Governments or, perhaps, for this Government in another Session. The costs of road traffic accidents will be paid entirely by co-payment by insurance companies, albeit directly to hospitals. That is a grave concern, however much the Government assure us that the principle will not be extended.

We must consider the principle mentioned by the hon. Member for South Swindon—I am glad that she made the point for me—who said that it seems illogical to stop at hospital costs. I might support her in Committee if she tables an amendment, because without one, there will be a perverse incentive for hospitals not to discharge patients for community nursing because they will be able to retain the £435 a day that they are able to charge for in-patients.

Another incentive is created by the flat-rate out-patient charge. It may be that it already exists but because hospitals do not collect the charge, it is not at the forefront of administrators' minds. It would be much more cost effective for hospitals to see people once in out-patients, rather than recurrently, because no matter how often people are seen in out-patients, the revenue to the hospital is the same. I question whether purchasers will take note of the Secretary of State's words that the charges are deemed to pay for the entire cost of road traffic accidents and will not be willing to fund such accidents as a part of their contracts with hospitals.

For all those reasons, Liberal Democrat Members cannot support the Second Reading of the Bill. We will work constructively in Committee to improve the Bill, but we seek reassurances from Ministers on the points of principle that I have raised.

6.57 pm

Mr. Andrew Dismore (Hendon): I first took an interest in this subject in the late 1980s, during my work as a solicitor specialising in personal injury litigation. In 20 years of practice as a PI lawyer, I have found it increasingly unfair that, under private health insurance policies, I could be forced by the likes of BUPA to claim back their expenditure on the private treatment of accident victims who were their members, while the NHS could not effectively make similar claims. As a passionate believer in the NHS, I found it particularly galling to send cheques for thousands of pounds to private health insurers, but not to the NHS.

I first flagged up that problem in a pamphlet that I wrote for the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers in 1990. I should say that I have a non-pecuniary interest as a member of APIL's executive committee. I again raised the issue in 1996, in a book published by the Society of Labour Lawyers entitled "Law Reform for All", when I wrote:

> "Private medical insurers such as BUPA are entitled to recover their outlays, and the NHS should not be put in a more disadvantageous position than a medical insurer."

Of course, as hon. Members have said, there is nothing new in what the Bill proposes. Recovery of medical expenses was first introduced in Herbert Morrison's Road Traffic Act 1930, which also introduced compulsory insurance for motor vehicles.

Equally, there is nothing new about the tort principles of common law, which have provided restitutory rights going back centuries. In its response to the Law Commission in April 1997, APIL said:

> "We believe that not to provide a right of recoupment would grant the tortfeasor an unjust benefit, paid by the taxpayer, in that the taxpayer is righting the wrong committed by the tortfeasor through the payment for the treatment of the victim."

[Mr. Andrew Dismore]

What is new is that people have been waking up to the unfairness of the system for the NHS, and, more importantly, its patients. In *Personal Injury* magazine in 1996, the general editor, Frederick Holding, said:

"the medical and legal communities should wake up to the fact that the insurance industry is having a parasitic effect on the taxpayer, the welfare state and NHS emergency services in particular. It is little wonder that the NHS is in crisis when victims of serious accidents, who have the legal right to have their treatment paid for by the insurers of the tortfeasor, are still draining the resources of an NHS system".

That, of course, was the position under the previous Government, and there have been great improvements in the health service since then, but the basic principle still applies.

I was pleased that the Law Commission took an interest in the subject in its full and well-argued consultation paper No. 144, which was published in December 1996 and in which it flagged up the issues involved. My only regret at the time was the Tory Government's complete failure to take on board the possibilities raised by the Law Commission. I am extremely pleased that my right hon. Friends the Secretary of State and the Chancellor have reacted so quickly by introducing this Bill.

This is not a tax on accidents, as the Tories have claimed. The Bill allows the NHS to get back what it is rightly owed. A great deal of debate has focused on motorists, but half the road accident victims are pedestrians, cyclists and passengers, and are not responsible for insurance; they just need to be treated.

The hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) mentioned uninsured drivers. There is a general problem in people failing to take out insurance, and the amount involved in this Bill is a fleabite compared to the total bill of the Motor Insurers Bureau. One way forward could be through the introduction of insurance discs for motor vehicles in a similar way to tax discs, so that we can catch those without insurance.

Despite the provisions of the Road Traffic Act 1930 and the various amendments now consolidated in the Road Traffic Act 1988, the insurance industry has been getting away with ripping off the NHS for years. Of course, the NHS did not pursue its rights effectively, and has let the insurance industry off the hook. However, the fact remains that insurers have not been paying out what they should. They have made windfall profits at the expense of NHS patients for decades.

We are told that premiums may have to go up. The best estimate so far is that they may go up by £6 to £9. I believe that the competitive market for insurers could well absorb that expenditure. That figure overlooks a number of key advantages introduced by this scheme. First, there are advantages for road safety. Car insurance is worked out according to risk, and bad drivers pay more. If part of the impact of the scheme is that bad drivers have to pay more for their insurance, they may improve their driving standards. One third of a million people are injured on our roads each year, and we need to look at the advantages for road safety.

A further advantage is the care of the victims. In the personal injury world, there is a new and growing concern for the victim's wider interests, going beyond compensation alone. Increasingly, we are seeing moves to look much more at issues such as the need for rehabilitation care, intensive physiotherapy and so on, so that we can do all that can be done to improve a victim's recovery. Regrettably, such services are somewhat patchily available in the NHS, and some places are better than others.

There are discussions in principle and on individual cases between those who represent victims and the insurers, trying to persuade the insurers that it is in their interests as well as those of the victims to fund such care packages. In the long run, it is cheaper to compensate a fully or better recovered victim than someone with on-going disabilities. If the on-going cost of NHS treatment is to be met by insurers, it will be a real incentive for them to look to the better and quicker recovery of the injured person

In APIL's submission to the Law Commission, we said:

"We believe that recoupment will encourage insurers to adopt a broader approach to the plaintiff's condition beyond mere damages. Insurers will be encouraged to organise private care regimes at an earlier stage, where the extent and cost of the care regime can be negotiated and agreed between the parties, to their mutual benefit."

That could also relieve some pressure on NHS services.

The measure will also generate additional funds for the NHS, as the money recovered will be ploughed back into the hospitals concerned, allowing more patients to be treated more quickly.

According to the reply that I received to a parliamentary question last year, currently only £13 million comes back to the NHS. The Wellhouse Trust, which is the acute service provider in my area, clawed back only £45,000 in 1996–97, despite treating almost 89,000 patients in the accident and emergency department, let alone any follow-up in-patient care or elective surgery that might have been needed. That works out at just 50p per casualty. Of course not all those patients were road accident victims, but that shows the scale of the problem.

In 1990, the total cost to the NHS of all accidents was estimated at £1 billion. According to a 1984 study, road accidents account for 18.5 per cent. of all accidents, and result in 34 per cent. of victims bringing claims. Allowing for a proportion of those not succeeding, the estimate of about £50 million or £60 million seems fairly accurate—four times what is currently being recovered, but significantly less than some of the scare stories being put around by some in the insurance industry. I wish that it was higher, but we have to be realistic.

I hope that we will look at a substantial capping of the ceiling. A total of £10,000 is all well and good, but I recall in the past having to send cheques to BUPA for tens of thousands of pounds in response to its incredibly itemised bills. The NHS should be on the same level playing field. I believe that a tariff-based approach is correct, but as we get into better benchmarking of NHS treatment costs, I hope that we can produce a more sophisticated tariff based on the benchmark costs of various procedures. That would result in rewarding efficient hospitals, and encouraging the less efficient to improve towards the average.

I do not believe that the Bill deals well with the length of the recoupment period. The Department of Social Security has a sensible rule, limiting recovery to the date of settlement or five years from the accident. That provides an added incentive to insurers to deal with claims promptly, which I am sure we all wish to see.

I believe that the Government are correct to put the administration of the scheme into the hands of the compensation recovery unit. When that was first set up by the Tories in 1989 for DSS recoupment, it was a real disaster. It worked unfairly against the interests of victims, and led to many calls for its reform, not least from the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers, the Trades Union Congress, the Law Society and others, and ultimately the Select Committee on Social Security.

Having done some work on this, I found myself in the rather peculiar position of advising the then Tory Government, Labour Front Benchers and Liberal Democrat Front Benchers at the same time on reforms to the legislation. That emerged as the Social Security (Recovery of Benefits) Act 1997, which dealt with many of the problems we were experiencing. The CRU is now a major success story.

The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) mentioned the cost of the CRU. I took that up at the time, and was told that the unit cost of a recoupment claim for the DSS was less than £10. The system that we are introducing with this Bill will be cheaper, because it is simpler. In response to the question raised by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin), the CRU recovers £180 million a year, one third of which is from road accidents. It has done so efficiently, and by respecting the necessary confidences of all parties involved.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is right to ensure that victims are excluded from the operation of the scheme. That problem was always one of the failings of the DSS scheme, and it remains a problem, although it is dealt with in a much better way now. By keeping the victims out, we reinforce the message that there is no question of the victim having to pay for medical treatment. That must remain free at the point of delivery.

However, in that way, we can also enlist the help of victims in recovering what is due to the NHS. If victims are given copies of the certificates, they can say whether they are accurate or whether there is an under-estimate. Victims are much more likely to co-operate with the Department's CRU than with some of the private companies that have sprung up. I am sure that the Government have had many approaches from such companies saying that they could do a better job. Compared to the present system, that is undoubtedly so, but we should resist their blandishments, because the CRU will knock spots off them when the new scheme is set up.

The confidentiality of the CRU will help to reduce the growing abuse of claims assessors, putting pressure on victims to bring claims via their dubious services. That often results in victims recovering less compensation overall at a higher price to them through the contingency fee arrangement. Many of the companies involved in road traffic accident recoupment so far on behalf of trusts have a "claims assessor" arm. I believe that there is some evidence that they have abused the information given them by the trusts to drum up trade, putting pressure on victims. Victims must be properly informed of their rights, but they must not be pressured into bringing claims that they would not otherwise bring.

If I have one concern about the Bill, it is that perhaps it does not go far enough. I hope that, when the Law Commission report is published, it will be carefully considered by the Government. I believe that that report is promised for February 1999. It is proper for us to await the outcome of that report before looking further at these proposals, but there are some extensions that we should look at.

First, there is the NHS drugs bill. For donkey's years, accident victims have recovered the amount they spend on prescription charges and proprietary medicines. Of course, the total cost to the NHS of the medicines involved is far greater, and we should look to the insurers for the difference between the amount paid by the patient and the cost to the NHS. That may be an administrative problem at the moment, but, with better computerisation, it can be overcome. For example, I once recovered over £500 in prescription charges for a victim. Just think what the total cost to the NHS must have been for the medication received by that victim. The topping up to the full cost requires further examination.

Secondly, we have heard a great deal in the debate about how the scheme could be extended to other areas. I believe that we should look at other areas of compulsory insurance, particularly accidents at work and employers' liability. Such accidents account for half as many injuries again as road accidents—27 per cent. compared with 18.5 per cent of all personal injury accidents. With the help of trade unions' well-developed legal assistance schemes, 24 per cent. of victims claim. Such an extension of the scheme would probably double the amount recoverable.

I can see no philosophical difference between those two areas of compulsory insurance, and believe that both could be made subject to NHS recoupment. In fact, there are positive advantages. In the same way as these proposals could impact on road safety and better care of road accident victims, they could have an impact on health and safety in the workplace, by strengthening the drive for better working conditions through insurers being tougher with bad and unsafe employers, and through better rehabilitation, helping injured employees to get back to work more quickly.

My third suggestion concerns the cost of long-term care, which is sometimes borne by the NHS but more often by local authorities. The legal position on recoupment of these costs is very unclear. Some local authorities expect accident victims or their representatives to sign subrogation agreements, and either expect the victims' lawyers to get the moneys from the insurer, or, even worse, try to claw it back after the event from victims' compensation.

This uncertain area of the law means that disputes are often long drawn out, making cases harder to settle. Sometimes it results in satellite litigation, such as the case of Avon *v.* Hooper in December 1997, in which Avon county council tried to get the money out of the deceased victim's family, adding to that family's distress. It would be far better if the legal position were clarified through legislation such as this. I should certainly like to see local authorities in a similar position to the NHS in being able to recover their costs.

I very much welcome the Bill, which is long overdue. It will bring in additional and badly-needed resources to the NHS. It will ensure that those responsible for road accidents meet the full costs, through their insurers, of their negligence. I hope that we shall continue this reform process along the lines that I have described.

7.11 pm

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I shall speak briefly to support the Bill, and perhaps I can set it in its proper context, as only one small part of a package of measures that will modernise our approach to health. That package clearly includes the £21 billion of extra investment from the comprehensive spending review. It also includes various measures to tackle prescription fraud. It ranges from the reforms of the national health service modernisation Bill to many of our public health measures, such as extra investment in housing and modernisation of local government, through to the Government's work to tackle financial exclusion.

The Bill is not about the introduction of a tax on motorists, and there are no great new issues of principle involved. I remember being in the Chamber when the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) promised us mature and constructive opposition. The shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe), was never so ambitious. I assume that that is why the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) was allowed to run with the scare story that compulsory health insurance would somehow result from the Bill.

For more than 60 years, hospitals have had the right to recover some of the costs of treating victims of road accidents. Indeed, since the introduction, under the Conservative Government, of the Road Traffic Act 1988, those costs are in theory recoverable from an insurance company. I say that that is the position "in theory", because the system, mirroring the wider Conservative approach to health care in the late 1980s and early 1990s, was highly bureaucratic and overly complex, and created unnecessary administrative burdens. The Bill will simplify and improve the way in which money is collected, so that the NHS gets the money to which it has been entitled for the past 50 years.

The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) did the debate a service when he highlighted the wide variations in moneys that have been collected by hospitals. That variation is clearly because of the complex bureaucracy that has been so lucidly outlined by my hon. Friend the Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) and others. My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), in highlighting many of the health charges facilitated by the health reforms introduced by the previous Conservative Government, performed a useful service in signalling the double standards that lie behind the Opposition's amendment.

In contrast to the scare stories of the Liberal Democrats, the Bill will abolish a charge on patient care. It will move the NHS even closer to its founding principle of a service available when needed, where it is needed, with clinical need, not income, the key determinant.

The Bill will abolish the emergency treatment fee which has to be collected by NHS staff from injured motorists. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) said, that process causes offence and embarrassment. It is a completely unwelcome distraction from what NHS staff do so well, which is looking after the injured.

Dr. Harris: Does the hon. Gentleman feel that the proposal returns the NHS to a mainly taxation-funded system, even if the increased efficiencies of the scheme increase the proportion of NHS revenue that is raised from such charges? Does that return the NHS more to the principles of taxation?

Mr. Thomas: In the sense that the purpose of the Bill is to abolish one of the charges on patient care, it will clearly return to the founding principles that I have outlined.

The emergency treatment fee is highly unfair. It is levied regardless of whether the injured person was responsible for the accident. It is clear that the NHS has not been receiving the moneys to which it has been entitled. We know that only £13.17 million was recouped for the NHS in 1995–96 under existing legislation. According to recent estimates, NHS trusts could have claimed £50 million, £100 million, or—much less likely—anything up to £440 million.

The first beneficiaries of the reforms in the Bill will be the Opposition parties, whose difficulties on health service financing are well documented. It will not solve those difficulties for them, but it will provide some small fig leaves to small parts of the holes in their funding plans. The right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald cannot obtain permission from the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer to welcome the £21 billion of new investment in the NHS, or to offer positive suggestions on how that money should be spent. Apart from some vacuous waffle about more private sector investment, the shadow health team has not suggested where the money will come from for more investment in the health service.

The Liberal Democrats, too, will benefit. They threw out the plans of the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) at their conference, without one vote in favour. Indeed, the party's plans were described as shambolic. It is therefore not surprising that both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats have rushed to exaggerate, quoting the highest estimates they can find of the likely income that the Bill will generate.

As the Liberal Democrat approach to finances owes more to Heath Robinson than to accounting guidance, I am certain that, just as with their 1p on income tax, the modest moneys raised through the Bill will be spent many times over in the coming months.

Even £100 million extra would make an important difference to the services that hospitals can supply. Such a sum will provide small additional increases in income over and above the £21 billion that will be invested throughout the health service. That investment was described by the NHS Federation as beyond its wildest dreams. It was described by the Institute of Health Service Management as a

"massive injection of new cash."

The truth, sadly, is that, such has been the scale of under-investment in patient care by the Conservative party, it would be entirely irresponsible to fail to secure these extra funds, to which hospitals have always been entitled, for the treatment of road traffic accidents.

The Bill is an entirely sensible measure, which is long overdue. It will help to modernise the way in which we collect moneys due to the health service, and I warmly welcome it.

7.18 pm

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): We have had a lively and wide-ranging debate. Indeed, it has perhaps been rather more lively than some right hon. and hon. Members expected when they entered the Chamber this afternoon.

Perhaps the Bill and the Road Traffic Act 1988, which goes in harness with it, can best be described as measures that allow the national health service to piggy-back successful claims for compensation so as to recoup some of the health treatment costs from insurance companies. As every Opposition Member has said, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe)—I am happy to reiterate this—we do not challenge that principle. However, we challenge the Government to explain how what they are doing by means of the Bill fits into any policy that they have previously expressed on charging in the NHS. We challenge them also to justify increasing the incidence and burden of costs on motorists, who are already very hard pressed.

The House will have noticed that what the Government are doing was never in the Labour party's manifesto. Labour did not give a clue to the electorate, whose vote they sought, that it would do something like this. It is yet another typical example of Labour saying one thing and doing another.

The Bill comes at a cost to the motorist in the form of a compulsory charge. We have tabled our reasoned, and reasonable, amendment to highlight that cost, and I welcome the Liberal Democrats' decision to join us today in the Lobby.

I listened very carefully to the Secretary of State's speech. He brazenly said that the proposals in the Bill will not cause the imposition of any new charges. Technically, in some respects, he is right. However, the magnitude— *[Interruption.]* As I told the House and Labour Members, I am nothing in debating these matters if not reasonable and constructive. I should think that even Labour Members will appreciate that the charge's magnitude and incidence will be dramatically increased. The charge will therefore be bigger and more burdensome.

Opposition Members agree with the Government on the proposal to abolish the emergency treatment fee. I do not quite understand why—perhaps the Minister will explain it to the House—general practitioners and hospitals can still collect that fee. I look forward to hearing the Minister's explanation of why they can do so.

The hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) is a very confused man. He said that the case of the German tourists who incurred a £45,000 bill in his constituency was a simple one because the insurance company paid the bill, although he was unable to explain to us the difference between insurance charges—which he was advocating and said were acceptable—and general health insurance. His exact words were that his constituents would feel that insurance charges were "a charge worth paying to support the health service." In a subsequent intervention, he supported charges in principle and criticised proposals to abolish them. Thus, he became the first Labour Back Bencher to support insurance premiums for national health service treatment.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) was quite right that the Bill would increase the scale of the current scheme. He also argued that a premiums increase would be a regressive tax. He was quite right also to say that the Government think of charges as an easy little pot of resources on which to draw.

The hon. Member for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe) mentioned the Law Commission, and said that it might well recommend extending the scope of the type of scheme proposed in the Bill. He appeared to endorse such an extension. He said that he does not want health insurance. However, in one respect, he will have it—and he is supporting it—in the Bill.

Mr. Hinchliffe: If the hon. Gentleman reads my speech tomorrow, he will see that I did not say that. I specifically distanced myself from proposals to extend the scheme, as he is suggesting. Will he deal with the point that I made on the inconsistency between the reasoned amendment tabled by the shadow Health Secretary and her colleagues and the previous Government's introduction of car-parking charges?

Mr. Duncan: The inconsistency today is among Labour Members—some of whom want to extend the scope of the scheme, some of whom want to reduce it and some of whom want to keep it as it is. They are totally at odds one with another.

My hon. Friend the Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) rightly pointed out the effect on motorists of charging.

The hon. Member for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg) vividly described the crash that she herself suffered. So well did she describe it that, for a moment, I almost felt that I was in that car. However, she was yet another Labour Member welcoming NHS charges as proposed in the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) made it clear that a charge is a charge. He spoke of the effect of uninsured motorists, and drove a coach and horses through any remaining pretence that the Government have any consistent principle in their thinking.

The hon. Member for Crawley (Laura Moffatt) seemed to give full support for national health service health insurance, and admitted that it would be a compulsory charge for NHS treatment.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin)—who has apologised to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to the House for not being able to stay for the conclusion of the debate—ably described how the Government are so devoid of principle that, in the Bill, they are doing the opposite of what they led the electorate to expect before the general election. Although I was very grateful for his kind words about my libertarian credentials, I was more grateful to him for cogently dissecting what I and everyone else now recognise as the Government's intellectual poverty.

The hon. Member for South Swindon (Ms Drown) is a public sector accountant. Therefore she, above all, should know about compulsory insurance. However, she made no case as to why only motorists should face paying such a charge.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) made yet another plea for some expression of principle by the Government. I fear that his plea will have fallen on deaf ears.

[Mr. Duncan]

The hon. Member for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) clearly is new Labour. He tried to give credit for the Bill to the grandfather of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. If the hon. Gentleman drives as fast as he speaks, he will always be done for speeding. He wishes to extend the charging concept, whereas the hon. Member for Wakefield—who is sitting behind him—does not.

The hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas), too, seems to be totally at odds with the hon. Member for Wakefield.

The Government's approach to the Bill demonstrates their incoherence on the overall issue of national health service charging and on the way in which money in the health service works. The Secretary of State keeps saying that there is no rationing; yet the Government—as they always have done—ration. He said that NHS charges must never exist; yet—in this very Bill—the Government most clearly will charge. The Bill will broaden the incidence of charging. The Secretary of State rails against charges, but today he promotes them. It is an extraordinary volte-face.

The Bill will increase the scope of charging for treatment, but where is its logic? What will happen next? Let us consider an example that is currently in the news. Barry Horne, an animal rights activist, is on hunger strike. No one has injured him; he is inflicting his condition on himself. He is in a hospital in Yorkshire and is a cost to the national health service. Does the Secretary of State think that he should be charged in some way for the treatment that he is receiving? Does he think that he should pay the costs of the delayed opening of the hospital's new cancer ward, if it is delayed?

Does the Secretary of State think that charging will eventually be applied to other places that are insured, such as offices and homes, where there might be a fire or an accident? Will charging be applied to train crashes or to dreadful, massive events such as Hillsborough or Zeebrugge when compensation is paid out?

Does the Secretary of State intend—perhaps he will do the House the courtesy of listening—that, one day, charging might extend to what is deemed a "class action" against tobacco manufacturers, so that those smokers—whose treatment clearly has imposed a cost on the NHS—also have to pay?

The logic of the legislation shows that it is not about risks that are compulsorily insured but about cases in which compensation happens to be delivered and in which, in the case of motorists, there happens to be compulsory insurance. It is an easy route to a wider charge. No proof of fault is required. There was no principle in the Secretary of State's statement about insurance being compulsory. The simple fact is that compensation in such cases can easily be traced and then returned to the national health service.

The costs of charging will be passed on. Estimates of the costs range from £50 million to £450 million. Even if the costs figure falls between the high and low estimates, they will cause motorists a notable expense.

Let us be clear about it: the Government's proposals will hereby extend compulsory charging for NHS treatment of motorists. Let us ignore the Secretary of State's words; let us look at his deeds.

Motorists will be hit—perhaps, if the higher estimate applies, quite hard. Motorists have already had to pay £9 billion extra in fuel tax. After today's announcement by the Deputy Prime Minister, they will probably have to pay road charges. Their vehicle excise duty has gone up, and they face a new car registration tax. Now, they will have to pay for the Bill's proposals.

I think that the Secretary of State probably used to attack the insurance premium tax, but now he is introducing another tax. He even had the gall to say that insurance premiums will not rise, and cited the case of Direct Line insurance, which essentially said that it already factored in the charges. A charge on an institution does not mean that the individual is not eventually charged. The Government are proposing a wider and more burdensome charge that will fall on the hard-pressed motorist. I urge the House to support our reasoned amendment.

7.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): As the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) said, this has been a lively debate. More importantly, it has been a well informed and useful debate, in which several hon. Members, particularly Labour Members, have brought their professional and personal experiences to bear on the issue. I should like to respond as fully as possible to the points that have been raised. If I am not able to cover all the points, I shall write to the relevant hon. Members when I have an opportunity for more detailed consideration.

I am afraid that the speech by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton has come roughly 70 years too late. The subject matter of the Bill has been on the statute book for that long. As I am sure that he would be the first to admit, when the Conservatives had the opportunity to consider the issue, they endorsed the principle that we are debating.

We have heard sensible contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew), for Wakefield (Mr. Hinchliffe), for Aberdeen, South (Miss Begg), for Crawley (Laura Moffatt), for South Swindon (Ms Drown), for Hendon (Mr. Dismore) and for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas). I shall also deal with some of the points made by Opposition Members.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle welcomed the abolition of the emergency treatment fee, as did many other hon. Members. It will be widely welcomed, particularly in the national health service. He highlighted the inefficiencies of the present scheme and mentioned the benefits that the new arrangements will bring to the national health service in Cumbria.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) appeared to be in favour of statutory mechanisms for setting the price of motor insurance, which I found curious. He proceeded to read out most of the Liberal Democrat reasoned amendment, which did not add much to our proceedings. He then tried manfully to distinguish it from the Conservative reasoned amendment, which he went on to say that he would vote for anyway. That is the Liberal Democrats.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Oh dear! We had hoped better of the new Minister, but he has yet to amend his ways. He

has mentioned insurance contributions. Can he guarantee that insurance premiums for car drivers will not go up as a result of the Bill?

Mr. Hutton: I intend to deal with that later in my speech.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield also welcomed the abolition of the emergency treatment fee and pointed out the inconsistencies in the Opposition position. He did us all a favour by drawing attention to the ambiguous position adopted by the Conservatives.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Swindon referred to her experience of trying to administer the existing arrangements. She spoke for many in the national health service when she welcomed the proposals. She described the existing arrangements as complicated and bureaucratic. I assure her that we want the new arrangements to be clear and straightforward. Local hospitals should benefit directly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, South made a persuasive and effective speech, drawing attention to the absurdities of the present arrangements and the fact that the national health service loses out. I welcome her support for the Bill. She also pointed out that the new arrangements will apply to the national health service in Scotland.

The hon. Member for Poole (Mr. Syms) repeated his concerns about the impact on motorists. I shall deal with that in a moment. He also expressed concerns about what he described as new bureaucracy in the arrangements. That is rich coming from the Conservatives. We are proposing a streamlined system for recovering the charges that are owed to the national health service. It is the best and least bureaucratic scheme that we can devise and it will deliver benefits to the national health service. Intriguingly, he said that he supported some parts of the Bill, but declined to say which. It is a shame that he is going to join his hon. Friends in voting against the Bill.

My hon. Friend the Member for Crawley welcomed the involvement of the compensation recovery unit. She brought her experience as a nurse to the debate on the emergency treatment fee. She rightly said that the Bill is about fairness.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) is not in his place. Of course, that gives me an opportunity not to refer to his speech, which is a serious temptation. However, I should let my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State know that the hon. Gentleman expressed his admiration for him, which was gratefully received by Labour Members. Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman spoiled it by failing to understand the terms of the Bill or the Government's policy. That revealed the confusion that underpins the Conservative response to our proposals. Sadly, he allowed the hatred of everything European to surface again. He deserves some praise for his ingenuity in getting Europe into the debate. Like other Opposition Members, he has sought to read more into the Bill than he should.

The hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) joined the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey in showing that the Liberal Democrats do not have a coherent or rational position on this occasion—as on many other occasions. It is a mistake for them to join the Conservatives in opposing the Bill.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The Minister cannot seriously say that the Government's position is coherent. They say that they are against more charges, but they are bringing forward a Bill that would allow charges in one area to go up. No charges were mentioned in the Labour manifesto, but suddenly, hey presto, the Government are to produce more money from somewhere and charge the public for it.

Mr. Hutton: The hon. Gentleman has not understood the Bill. No new charges are being introduced. I thought that he had tried to make that point. The logic of his argument, although he did not spell it out in detail, is that he wants to increase taxes substantially. He will have to deal with that when the voters make their judgment at the next general election.

I should like to return briefly to the subject of the debate—the Bill. As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State pointed out, it will enable hospitals to benefit fully for the first time in more than 60 years from the provisions that successive Administrations have endorsed, although they have never been given practical effect. This is not the first step on a slippery slope towards charging for NHS treatment. Let me make it crystal clear—no patient is to be charged and no one will be required to insure themselves against the cost of future treatment. The principle that has been in force throughout the existence of the NHS remains: the road user is required to insure against risk to third parties. That includes reimbursing hospitals for the cost of treating third parties.

We are not talking about charging everyone involved in a road accident for the cost of NHS treatment. The charges will be levied only when a claim for compensation arising from a road traffic accident has been made. The charge will be levied against the insurer of the person responsible for the accident. We estimate that approximately 40 per cent. of all road traffic accidents will be covered by the Bill.

Reference has been made to insurance premiums. Much of what has been said and written is patently untrue. Our figures show that if insurers pass on the charge—which is by no means certain, as some insurers have been open enough to admit—the effect on the average premium should be very small indeed—around 2 to 3 per cent. or £6 to £9. Insurers already factor potential NHS charges—whether or not they are collected—into premiums.

As many of my hon. Friends have said, our new system will see in NHS hospitals the end of the iniquitous charging of the emergency treatment fee. That will be better for drivers, hospitals and insurers. Each year there are hundreds of thousands of small transactions between hospitals and drivers and drivers and their insurance companies which will end when the Bill receives Royal Assent. At the current rate of £21.30, the cost of that process must certainly outweigh the benefit. The abolition of the emergency treatment fee will be welcome news to many people in and outside the national health service.

NHS care is and will remain free to all those who need it. The Bill does not affect that principle. It does not usher in a free season on that principle and it does not remotely hint at a change in direction. Nobody will be denied care or be prevented from seeking it as a result of the Bill. NHS patients stand to benefit directly from the practical steps brought in as a result of the measure and on that basis I commend it to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 150, Noes 347.

Division No. 18] **[7.41 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Body, Sir Richard
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Brady, Graham
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Colvin, Michael
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Day, Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, Michael
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fox, Dr Liam
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
Maclennan, Rt Hon Robert
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Swinney, John
Syms, Robert
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Willis, Phil
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Sir David Madel and
Mr. Tim Collins.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Rt Hon Dr Jack *(Copeland)*
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dafis, Cynog
Dalyell, Tam
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce

Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McLeish, Henry
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malliaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mountford, Kali
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Roy, Frank
Ruane, Chris
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Hanson and
Mr. David Jamieson.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time, and committed to a Standing Committee, pursuant to Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of Bills).

ROAD TRAFFIC (NHS CHARGES) BILL [MONEY]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) fees and allowances to members of any appeal tribunal established by regulations made under the Act;

(b) any other expenditure incurred by the Secretary of State in consequence of the Act; and

(c) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums so payable by virtue of any other Act.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 25 (Periodic adjournments),

That this House, at its rising on Thursday 17th December, do adjourn till Monday 11th January 1999.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Question agreed to.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Thursday 17th December, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until she shall have notified the Royal Assent to Acts agreed upon by both Houses.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

Rail Fares

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Dowd.]*

7.56 pm

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): Like me, the Minister will probably be rather pleased that this Adjournment debate is taking place earlier than it might have done. Although I do not intend to speak at length, I am more relaxed about timing than I was.

The train network is an integral part of our daily national life and it will become even more important as we strive to cut the number of unnecessary car journeys to avoid congestion and unnecessary environmental destruction. As things stand, car ownership is predicted to rise by 15 per cent. each decade, and many roads and motorways are already running at full capacity. The rail network is vital in reducing the resulting congestion and air pollution.

Rail could take a bigger proportion of travellers and freight, but it will not do so unless it is made more attractive to passengers and to business. In general, rail fares are too expensive and the fare structure is too complicated. Fares have increased sharply in real terms in the past 20 years, but motoring costs have remained stable or have fallen.

According to Government figures, rail fares rose in real terms between 1974 and 1996 by 74.8 per cent. above inflation. By comparison, the real cost of motoring fell by 3.5 per cent. Travelling by car became far more affordable and train travel became less affordable, so it is no wonder that our roads are so clogged.

According to a Union Bank of Switzerland survey last year, rail fares in this country are now the most expensive on the planet. The cost of train travel in the United Kingdom is almost three times the world average. Since privatisation, the franchising director has regulated key commuter and leisure fares, including saver tickets, unrestricted standard return tickets and all standard weekly season tickets. Indeed, the franchising director has a duty under the Railways Act 1993 to regulate those fares where he considers that regulation is required in the interests of passengers.

The Conservative Government believed that market forces would prevent excessive price increases, leaving operators with the freedom to apply commercial judgment in setting a range of non-regulated fares. Those unprotected tickets include the supersaver—the cheapest national long-distance walk-on rail ticket—cheap day returns, family rail cards and the network card.

As Liberal Democrats predicted, companies have been increasing unprotected fares at rates well above inflation; they are clearly taking advantage of the legislative loopholes in the Railways Act. The increases are targeted largely at casual travellers, such as families, shoppers and people who cannot or do not book in advance, who account for about 40 per cent. of ticket sales. There is a very real fear now that, sooner or later, many of the low-cost regulated tickets will be phased out altogether.

Virgin Trains is the worst offender—perhaps unsurprisingly, since that name comes up regularly in these debates—and recently raised the supersaver on its cross-country network by four times the rate of inflation.

Virgin argues that it is introducing many new discount offers, but those cheap fares must be booked in advance, can be used only on Virgin trains, are limited by train, number of tickets available and time of day, can be purchased only at main stations or by credit card, are often not available for journeys to and from stations on connecting routes and both outward and return trains must be specified in advance. That is confusing, restrictive and clearly by no stretch of the imagination equivalent to the simple supersaver system.

Virgin is not by any means the only railway company poised to take money from many passengers. Midland Mainline is raising its open first-class return fare from Kettering to Sheffield by 26 per cent. On the politically sensitive west coast main line between London and Glasgow—where passenger complaints run at a startling one for every 100 journeys—there will be rises of up to 19 per cent.

In London, the regulator has already punished rail companies for their dismal performance by ordering them to keep increases below 1.9 per cent.—below inflation. Connex, which operates some of Britain's busiest commuter routes through south London, Kent and Sussex, has got around the restriction by raising the price of cheap day returns—which are not protected by the regulator—by an average of 6.5 per cent.

In my own county, we have been hit by two recent examples. In the spring, Great Western Trains restricted the use of saver tickets, banning them from early and late trains. This meant that passengers using the 5.35 pm from Paddington had to pay £120 return, rather than the previously available £58 saver fare. That is the last train to Penzance. Booking in advance would get passengers a fare reduction, but not everybody can do that. The day return discount remains, but a day return from Cornwall to London is hardly realistic, since it would leave only few hours at most in London. If one cannot book in advance, one must pay far more to travel at reasonable times.

Similarly, in 1995, Great Western planned to withdraw group travel arrangements for school parties from certain services. I took that up and got it reversed but, this October, the company did it again. Schools either pay full fare, or must travel when it is convenient for Great Western. In the case with which I was presented, that meant that people were not travelling on an early train to get home at a reasonable time, and were forced to arrive very late at night. Previously, we got the decision reversed almost immediately I took it up. On this occasion, after two months, Great Western has not even bothered to reply to my representations—despite repeated attempts to chase the company up.

Mr. Don Foster (Bath): My hon. Friend is right to say that it is not acceptable to have effective fare increases while punctuality is getting worse. However, does he accept that Great Western—which uses his constituency and mine—is not entirely responsible for some of the difficulties? Some of the punctuality problems lie at the door of Railtrack, rather than the operating company. Does he accept that a survey has shown that only 30 per cent. of punctuality problems are the result of Great Western, while 70 per cent. are the result of Railtrack? Does he agree, therefore, that Railtrack should get its act together and do more to help the companies?

Mr. Taylor: I thank my hon. Friend, and there is time for him to elaborate on that point in a speech, if he wishes. The point is well made. There are problems with Railtrack. As a regular user of Great Western, I have relatively few complaints about the quality of service, and the staff do a superb job. However, on fares, Great Western and others have used the unregulated system as a means of making up the costs of the restrictions on regulated fares. That has done a considerable disservice to passengers in Cornwall, who may, on average, end up paying a little less, but do so for a service that is not at the times they want. There is also the risk that, if they cannot travel at those times, they have to pay considerably more.

All the rail companies argue that, by offering advance booking discounted tickets instead of supersavers, they are not penalising passengers, but that is nonsense. The tickets are generally limited in number, more limited in terms of which services are included and require considerable pre-planning. There is no flexibility if those plans go awry.

The railway is traditionally a "turn-up-and-go" carrier—greatly to the benefit of passengers—and the application of an airline pre-booking style arrangement undermines the flexibility of rail travel. Ultimately, that will reduce the flexibility of passengers to use the service and, therefore, the numbers using it. My fear is that, as the ability of the service to take more passengers increases, profits will be taken from the increases, but flexibility will not be restored. Not all passengers can plan their journeys days or weeks in advance—especially the return leg. They therefore have to choose between a loss of flexibility or a higher—sometimes much higher—fare.

Analysis of ticket types by the Central rail users consultative committee revealed larger fare rises for passengers who purchase their tickets at the time of travelling and smaller fare rises for passengers who buy tickets in advance. Fares that could be purchased immediately before travel went up, on average, by 3.4 per cent., while tickets that had to be purchased in advance went up, on average, by 1.8 per cent.

Average fares paid by passengers are often quoted by the rail companies, and by the Government in official responses, on the ground that average fares paid by passengers have fallen. Those fares have fallen slightly in real terms, it is true, but that masks gains for some at the considerable expense of others. There has been an overall reduction in the flexibility of the service that passengers receive. These have not been free cuts: they have been cuts at the expense of the service that passengers get.

The Central rail users consultative committee—the statutory watchdog protecting and promoting the interests of rail passengers—has revealed that nine out of 25 train operators increased prices in real terms in spite of deteriorating performance, punctuality and reliability. It is not even the case that all companies are offering reduced real-terms prices on average. For instance, Connex South Eastern was able to raise fares by an average of 4.4 per cent. during a period when major delays increased by 30 per cent. and cancellations on the Kent coast services rose by a staggering 100 per cent.

A report issued yesterday by the Central rail users consultative committee set out the passenger charter figures for the year ending September 1998, and showed that the proportion of train delays is now 35 per cent. higher than in the year ending March 1997, which marked the completion of franchising. Complaints to the local

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committee network have also continued to rise, and are now more than a third up on the same period last year. In July, August and September of this year, the committee received nearly 5,000 complaints—an increase of 39 per cent. over the same period last year, and a 45 per cent. increase over the April-June total.

In Devon and Cornwall, the South West rail users consultative committee recorded a 200 per cent. increase in complaints last year—the highest in the country, but by no means exceptional. In November, the same committee made one of the more bizarre announcements by the rail industry—almost on a par with "the wrong kind of leaves". It announced that it could not cope with the rising tide of complaints—this is the body set up to receive complaints—and would no longer answer calls in the morning, so that it could deal with the backlog. I suppose refusing to answer the telephone is one way of cutting complaints, but it is not a solution of any help to irate passengers.

Since privatisation, companies have been concentrating their efforts on introducing their own fares, which are available only on their services and from which they keep all the revenue. Revenue from national fares is divided up between the companies. That reduces choice and price competition, and makes arranging travel far more complex.

For inter-city companies, we are moving towards an airline approach—multiple classes, multiple fares and multiple hassle, complication and misery. It is possible with certain companies to pick up cheaper advance fares, but the downside is that the fares structure becomes an impenetrable jungle, which the staff—never mind the passenger—have difficulty in understanding. For example, three different companies operate between Gatwick and central London, offering a total of 36 different standard-class fares.

Rail travellers are now being hit by a further blow: the withdrawal, not for the first time, of cheap travel over Christmas. That is a Scrooge-like measure at this time of year. Supersaver tickets have been cancelled from 18 December to 1 January. With increasing complaints, delays and cancellations, and the certainty of packed trains, the least the rail companies could do this year is to stop being Scrooge and offer a little Christmas spirit by maintaining saver tickets; that is, if anybody can find the right train in the first place: the Christmas timetable should have been available in early October but, like many services, it is running late. Some Christmas journey timetables have still not been published two weeks before Christmas.

Liberal Democrats opposed the Conservative Government's privatisation of the railways because we foresaw problems such as higher fare increases on non-regulated tickets, confused booking arrangements and deteriorating service. We and the Labour party did not believe that privatisation would deliver either a high quality of service or the necessary investment. Since privatisation, quality has indeed continued to decline. Private partnerships to increase investment in the system would have made sense; the botched system that we got did not. No wonder not a single Conservative Member is present for this debate.

I know that the Government accept that they need to tackle rail companies that continually abuse franchise loopholes, but their commitment to rail travel has so far failed to get legislative backing. I welcome the news that the Deputy Prime Minister announced this week: that, as a result of agreement on the handling of House of Lords reform, the Government hope as a priority to introduce legislation to establish a strategic rail authority. But that is not definite, to say the least, as the Conservative leader clearly has other ideas about that agreement, as we all know.

Frustrated rail travellers this Christmas may well wonder why the Deputy Prime Minister failed to secure the Bill in the Queen's Speech in the first place. They have heard the rail companies blaming the wrong kind of leaves for delays; perhaps this is an example of the wrong kind of Lords.

It is time for action. Welcome as the Government's words have been, non-regulated fares are going up at high speed, despite the fact that more and more trains are late or cancelled. The only answer is high-speed legislation from the Government to sort out the situation in the new year, not a further delay into the new millennium.

8.12 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I am grateful both to the Minister and to my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) for allowing me to make a brief contribution.

My hon. Friend, who normally speaks loudly and clearly on behalf of Cornwall, has taken a national perspective this evening, so I shall indulge in being rather more parochial than usual. I have one of the most rural constituencies in the United Kingdom, with only 100 yd of mainline railway. We have a branch line of which we are all extremely proud, and we hope that we can keep it, but we do not have a great railway service. Far be it from me to suggest that we should reopen all the lines that used to traverse the constituency, because that would cost a great deal.

Any effort to assist those who live in sparsely settled rural areas to get access to public transport will be a long and difficult process. We warmly welcome the Government's commitment to assisting people in rural areas, but access to the main railway network is extremely difficult for many of my constituents. That does not mean that we should not attempt to improve access. Many of my constituents have to travel many miles before they can reach a railhead, but it is none the less important for them to have access to the national and—through the channel tunnel—international rail network.

Cornwall has a high percentage of people who, through age or disability, have no access to cars. Welcome as the Government's commitment to rural public transport is, it would be even more impressive if we had more commitment to those who want to use that transport. There is no contradiction: it is perfectly possible to devise subsidies to support services that will not provide what people in fact need.

That is why we were especially glad that the Deputy Prime Minister committed himself to a national concessionary fare for public transport for all retired people. I hope that the Minister will spell out in a little more detail how that will work and what the time scale for implementation will be.

The comparatively urban communities that can provide concessionary fares tend to be the ones that least need them, for the simple reason that the distances to be travelled are much shorter, while more rural areas tend to have few or no concessionary fare schemes for the retired and the disabled. It is clearly preferable to subsidise passengers to fill trains—and buses—rather than subsidising operators for the losses that they make through vehicles being empty. I hope that that principle will underline the introduction of the scheme. More detail, please, and as early as possible. Many organisations and individuals feel that the scheme is the right way forward, but it must be introduced urgently.

As my party's Chief Whip, I underline our commitment to say godspeed to any legislation that will improve the Government's strategic control over the rail network: both Railtrack and the operating companies. That is urgent. If, as a result of the shenanigans at the other end of the Corridor last week, there is real progress in other legislation, I hope that the Government will find it possible urgently to introduce legislation to improve public transport.

I know that there are other candidates for any vacant slot in the legislative programme, and I would not want to express any great preference between freedom of information, the food standards agency and the strategic rail authority, but I hope that the Minister will take it from us that we wish her the very best of luck in trying to get the rail legislation into the programme.

8.18 pm

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): I entirely agree with the comments of my hon. Friends the Members for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) and for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). The fact that there are so many Liberal Democrats present tonight underlines my party's commitment to rail issues. Excluding yourself, Mr. Deputy Speaker, 75 per cent. of those present were Liberal Democrats, until the most recent arrivals—the figure may now be 60 per cent., and declining as I speak.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: Still no Tories.

Mr. Baker: That is true.

We must consider rail fares as a crucial part of the rail industry as a whole. Rail fares are important for social reasons. Many people who depend on public transport have no access to private motor vehicles, and it is doubly unfair for those—often in rural constituencies such as mine and those of many of my hon. Friends—who cannot afford cars to have to pay over the odds for train tickets.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell said, rail fares have increased dramatically compared with the increase in the cost of motoring over the past 20 years. That cannot make any sense socially or environmentally, as I am sure the Minister will agree. We and the Government want more people on trains and fewer on the roads. It would be helpful if the Government would commit themselves to a target under the road traffic reduction legislation, so that we can know that in a set period, perhaps four or five years, there will be a reduction target for the vehicles on our roads or the mileage that they clock up.

The Minister said earlier this Session that if no action was taken there would be a 9 per cent. increase in vehicles on our roads, or their mileage. That cannot be allowed to happen. We must get more people on trains. A key way to do that is to reduce fares—to eliminate some of the problems that have occurred over the past 20 years, when rail fares have rocketed.

I, too, will be parochial in this short debate and speak about my constituency. We have had a plan in my constituency for the massive upgrading of the trunk road—the A27—between Lewes and Polegate. I declare an interest, living next to the trunk road and next to the railway line. We live in an old railway cottage and therefore benefit or otherwise from both of those pieces of infrastructure.

The previous Government had a plan to spend £80 million on adding four lanes to the existing two lanes of the A27, without even looking at the potential of the parallel rail line. This Government have said that they are prepared to consider the integration of road and rail, and they must do that. If rail fares can be cut, even if that involves public money, that will help to solve traffic problems far more than spending on infrastructure works.

We must get away from the days when we were told that money spent on roads is investment and money spent on rail is subsidy. That is nonsense. Money spent on rail is investment as well, no matter whether it is spent on reducing fares or on infrastructure. Whether it meets a social and environmental end, helps to move people around or helps the economy, those are the criteria that the Government should use, rather than some artificial Treasury figure created in 1942, in setting out what should be invested in our infrastructure. The Government should not shy away from considering direct investment to reduce rail fares, if that is the most satisfactory way of achieving their integrated transport objectives.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and St. Austell rightly mentioned Connex and what the company has done to certain fares in south London. I have been negotiating with the company in my constituency, and I am happy to say that partly as a consequence of that—no doubt other factors are involved—certain off-peak fares from Lewes, Newhaven, Seaford and Polegate to London have been cut by 25 per cent. That is what we should encourage other train operating companies to do.

On the Carlisle-Settle rail line a few years ago, British Rail used to shut stations, reduce services, increase fares and then say that the line was not economic. After much pressure from the public, BR reversed its policy and started opening stations, marketing the line and attracting passengers, and the line is now a success. Rail companies can improve financial accountability and profitability by cutting fares. That is the message that I have given my local rail company, and I hope the same message will come out of the House tonight.

All the way through my constituency, we have rail lines parallel to roads. It would make a wonderful example for a case study, if the Government were minded to do that. We would be happy to co-operate if such a study were undertaken. The congestion problems on the trunk roads in my constituency could largely be solved if rail travel was made more attractive by reducing fares, introducing new rolling stock and making stations safer. If that is done, there will not be a problem on the A27 or the A26. We must start considering lateral solutions.

I shall mention one or two other matters, to which I hope the Minister will respond. National rail inquiries is not coming up to standard in terms of the number of calls

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answered within the due time—less than 90 per cent., according to the most recent figures. More to the point, it gives conflicting and inaccurate information regarding both the appropriate route for passengers to take and the cost of fares available on particular routes.

What quality measurement is taking place at national rail inquiries? It is easy to measure the speed of response to calls, but who is measuring the quality of the answers given by national rail inquiries? The answers given leave something to be desired. I suggest that quality is being sacrificed in an effort to reach the target of 90 per cent., as failure to meet it could result in a fine. That is not to the benefit of rail passengers.

The powers of the strategic rail authority need to be clarified. We are told that it will be introduced in shadow form or in full during this Session. What powers will it have? What powers will it take away from Railtrack? In my view, it should take away Railtrack's safety responsibilities. What powers will it have over fare levels? How will it interact with the rail regulator, Opraf?

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall mentioned the problems of elderly people travelling. A parliamentary answer that I received from the Minister this afternoon showed that the number of people who have bought a senior citizens railcard has dropped dramatically since 1990, although it has gone up over the past year. The population is getting older, so there should be more, not fewer, people buying such tickets. A disincentive has been applied to that ticket. Presumably, if older people are not buying the railcard, they are either using their cars or not travelling, neither of which is satisfactory if we want to encourage freedom of movement for all sections of society, including the elderly.

I accept that the problems are not the Government's fault because of what they inherited. I hope that they will be tough on the train operating companies where necessary, and perhaps also tough on the causes of the train operating companies, although they are not present tonight. I hope that the Government will introduce the strategic rail authority as soon as possible, give it firm powers and ensure that fares on our trains are cut.

8.25 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I am delighted to make a brief contribution to the debate. My constituency is not as rural as that of my hon. Friends. Harrogate and Knaresborough is an urban constituency, but we rely heavily on rail transport for the economic regeneration of the town and to get people in and out of the former West Riding conurbations, where they travel to work each day.

Harrogate boasts one of the largest conference and exhibition businesses in the United Kingdom. The Liberal Democrats will be holding their conference there next year. The conference and exhibition facilities attract visitors from all over the world. They arrive at Leeds-Bradford airport, which is an excellent regional airport, and travel to the constituency by road. It can take them as long to get from the airport into the conference centre as it took them to fly up from London, because of traffic congestion on the roads.

If people come up by train from London to York, they will have one of the best rail services in Europe. Great North Eastern Railway undoubtedly runs a Rolls-Royce service between London and Scotland on the east coast main line. I have no difficulty in praising GNER for running such a first-class service. However, people get off the train at York and have to wait for what can only be described as a horse and cart. The service provided by Northern Spirit between York and Harrogate and on to Leeds is unacceptable as we move towards the next millennium. It is a service more fitting for the 1950s than for the 21st century.

Because of the poor quality of the service and of the rolling stock, it is difficult to sell the service to the public who would wish to use it. The part of the line from Harrogate to Leeds is well used, especially at peak commuter times. It is impossible to get on the train particularly at the Leeds border, the point at which it hits the former West Riding passenger transport executive area. From that point on, there are subsidised fares, and, it is possible to travel at significantly reduced rates at peak and off-peak times. As soon as the train crosses the border from Leeds and North Yorkshire into my constituency, there are no such benefits or subsidies, and the people who rely on the line must pay the full fares despite having all the inconveniences of the line.

The Minister's right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister claimed that passenger transport executives would be extended, and that all authorities in the United Kingdom would receive the same benefits. Then, groups of people in large conurbations would not be treated differently from others in more rural and isolated areas, who, it could be argued, are more dependent on public transport. The people of my constituency certainly rely on public transport, and I hope that the Minister will tell us her plans to extend the benefits of passenger transport executives across the UK, and particularly into Harrogate and Knaresborough.

Many people in my constituency are elderly. People traditionally retire to Harrogate and Knaresborough as the constituency is beautiful and has many advantages. However, if they want to use the rail transport network to get to Leeds or York at either end of the line, especially if they have an ambulant disablement, they face real difficulties. The two ends of the line boast two of the largest stations in the UK, but they have not one escalator between them. Huge improvements are happening at York station, but when I asked when escalators would be installed, I was told that there would be none. I asked about the multi-million pound investment in Leeds station, and was again told that there would be no escalators.

It is extremely difficult for people who have mobility problems to use our stations. If we want people to use the railways, we have to provide facilities not only on trains, but in stations. Only then will people of all classes be attracted to using the system.

8.32 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) not only on securing the debate, but on managing—though not single-handedly—to introduce it earlier than expected into the House's programme this evening. He has afforded an opportunity to several of his hon. Friends to make speeches.

The hon. Members for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), for Lewes (Mr. Baker) and for Bath (Mr. Foster)—I regret that the last-named hon. Member is not in his place—

have each, in their individual and inimitable ways, raised the issue of rural transport, or, rather, the marked lack of it. Although the essential thrust of the debate raised by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell had to do with the failure of the railways to provide a first-rate service to the millions of people who are willing to travel on them, other issues have been raised.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall spoke of access to the railways from his rural constituency. He will be aware of the sizeable rural bus grant—£50 million every year for the next three years—which is being specifically targeted at tackling the type of issues that he and his hon. Friends have raised. Additional sums were available for a rural bus competition that sought innovative schemes to deal with the most sparsely populated and most dispersed rural communities, and we shall soon announce the results.

The hon. Members for North Cornwall, for Lewes and for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) spoke of how pensioners feel themselves to be impacted against. There again, the Government have taken steps to redress that position. Although few local authorities provide concessionary fares for their pensioners, as the House will know the Government have said that there will be a national scheme and it is proposed that all pensioners will be able to have them for a down payment of £5.

In the first instance, we are obviously concentrating on our bus network. We want bus services to increase and to integrate with rail services. The hon. Member for Lewes mentioned the availability of senior citizens' railcards and I have noticed the downturn in applications for the railcard in the past few years. In common with the hon. Gentleman, I am delighted that the figures are now rising, but I am not convinced that the failure to apply is necessarily due to the cost; it is due to the fact that our railways have not provided the type of service that we need.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough mentioned the inaccessibility of many stations. Through the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, the Government are committed to ensure that all public transport is accessible to all our citizens. Indeed, from 1 January all new rolling stock must be accessible to everyone, but I would not attempt to convince hc Members—nor would I be believed if I did—that all rolling stock will be accessible on that date; nor would I be believed if I attempted to convince them that all our stations will be accessible.

All hon. Members who spoke mentioned the need for a strategic rail authority. The lack of investment that marked the previous Administration for decades underlies all the specific and general problems that were raised tonight. The fact that investment in our railway network—

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Will the Minister comment on the total absence of the official Opposition? Is that a boycott, a snub, or evidence of a could-not-care-less attitude on the part of the Administration who left us in this situation?

Ms Jackson: I would like to think that that absence is due to a sense of shame, but that is highly unlikely as the Opposition markedly failed to express any of that attribute in anything that they said before or after their crushing defeat.

Essentially, the issue is the failure to invest adequately post-privatisation. As the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell said, the Liberal Democrat and Labour parties campaigned ferociously against what we still believe to have been a benighted policy. Post-privatisation there has been no strategic authority capable of directing, in the national interest, where investment should go. That would be one of the central responsibilities of the strategic rail authority and I was delighted that hon. Members welcomed the Government's proposal to create one.

I took on board the suggestion that the necessary legislation might be introduced sooner rather than later because of what I can only describe as some bizarre goings-on at the other end of the Corridor and the even more bizarre reactions to them by the Leader of the Opposition. As hon. Members will know, however, we have given a commitment that a shadow strategic rail authority will be in place by next April—we hope.

Mr. Tyler: I am glad to hear that, but will the Minister deal with the problem of co-ordination between the rail and bus networks? In the previous Parliament I was our party spokesman on transport during part of privatisation process and, as she rightly said, Labour and Liberal Democrat Members stood shoulder to shoulder to try to prevent the desecration of our rail system. One problem that resulted from the deregulation of the bus network in 1983 was the overall lack of co-ordination and integration between public transport services. In a constituency such as mine, if bus services do not link with train services, all the work that the strategic rail authority might do could be undermined.

Ms Jackson: I entirely agree and the train operating companies are beginning not only to talk to each other but to take on board the fact that—

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): I am seeking a meeting with Great Western to put the views of my constituents on rail fares and the lack of a train service to meet their needs. It has been brought to my attention that travel between Falmouth and Camborne and Paddington was faster in the 19th century than it is today. I find that staggering, as I am sure does the Minister. Does she support me in seeking that meeting to make the case for my constituents?

Ms Jackson: I strongly support my hon. Friend in her desire for a meeting with her train operating company. She is right about journey times. Across central London, they are about the same as they were in the 18th century. That is another thing that the Government are committed to addressing and redressing.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall mentioned the integration of the various transport modes. I believe that both the train operating companies and the bus providers realise—certainly we have urged them to—that the competition is not with one another but with the private car. That is not exclusively because bus and train companies are often one and the same, although bus companies have invested in train operating companies. As I have had occasion to say before, if they cannot provide high-quality services, and the choice is between sitting in

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an ever-growing traffic jam and standing on a wet, windy pavement or platform waiting for a vehicle that may not arrive, the car will win hands down every time.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: As several bus operators have taken over rail companies, does the Minister agree that it is unacceptable for companies to think that branch line services in particular can be replaced by bus services? There is a tendency in that direction. They clearly believe that there may be profits to be made from doing it.

Ms Jackson: If companies are approaching the matter on the basis of not expanding and increasing services, it is clearly something that one would not welcome. However, I will not say categorically that, in every instance, the best quality of service that can be provided, particularly in sparsely populated rural areas, must be the maintenance of a branch line, when an infinitely better, faster, more modern, more accessible service could be provided by, say, a coach that linked up with the main line.

However, all such proposals must be considered individually; there cannot be a blanket yes or no. That is one reason why the Government have found extra money for two new funds—the investment fund and the passenger fund. They will act as the seedcorn to bring together a partnership comprising several interests to advance a business case that could, for example, revitalise a branch line if custom warranted it.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough mentioned passenger transport executives and authorities. The recurring theme that informs Government thinking is the integration of our transport modes. We are looking to local authorities to create integrated transport plans for their areas. Again, we have made a major breakthrough, because they will be expected to submit plans that will take three to five years to complete, and involve budgets that will run for three years. We have got away from the annual begging bowl round for local authorities in presenting their transport plans. The integrated transport plans will have to fit in with the much wider regional transport plans.

I was impressed when I took part in four of the eight meetings between Ministers and the regional authorities by just how much co-operation and partnership is already in place throughout the country. I was impressed by the willingness—indeed, eagerness—of local and regional authorities to work together and to advance policies to produce the transport plans the country so desperately needs. We are talking about integrated transport, which requires that everyone involved should work together in a genuine spirit of partnership.

Mr. Willis: I am grateful for the response that the Minister has just made. May I clarify the issue of subsidies? The huge subsidies that are going into some of the existing passenger transport executives do not equate with the subsidy that goes into a county such as North Yorkshire. Is the Minister saying that resources will be equalised on a regional basis, or shall we still have inequities in grant aid?

Ms Jackson: If the hon. Gentleman is thinking of some of the passenger transport authorities and executives of which I am aware—I hope that he will not take it as an insult, but the one that most immediately comes to mind is Greater Manchester—my reply is that we have seen massive investment in rail infrastructure by those local authorities. The hon. Gentleman would call it special grant, but there has to be a balancing of the amount that such authorities have already invested to ensure that the investment gives a return.

We have managed, following the comprehensive spending review, to make available an additional £700 million for local authorities' transport plans. We have also introduced hypothecation. Local authorities will, via congestion charging and a private non-residential parking levy, be able to raise an income stream, which they will be able to use only for improving transport in their area. I repeat that local authorities will be expected to submit plans. They can plan for three to five years with the assurance that there will be budgets. We have got away from the annual begging bowl round.

I trust that the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell will forgive me for concentrating in the first part of my speech on the points made by his hon. Friends, many of which were inherent in his speech. I assure hon. Members on both sides of the House, and, indeed, the entire country, that issues surrounding transport in rural areas are central to the Government's thinking. We are well aware of the difficulties in many rural areas. We have taken major steps to address them. This is not empty rhetoric. We have put the wherewithal—money—behind it, to begin to address and redress the issues.

I am sure that the House and the country will agree that the last thing that rail passengers want for Christmas—the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell dubbed some of the train operating companies Scrooges—is news of even more fare rises. But with key fares now regulated by the franchising director, widespread annual above-inflation January increases are now a thing of the past.

However, despite that good news, I remain concerned—the speeches by other hon. Members this evening have confirmed that I am not alone in my concern—that some unregulated off-peak fares continue to increase above the rate of inflation. The growth market in discount fares has not stopped some operators putting up the prices in real terms of unregulated cheap day returns, supersavers and similar discounted fares. The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell gave some detailed information on that issue.

That has happened not only in the south-west but in many parts of the country, which will be of no comfort to the hon. Gentleman or any of his constituents. Basic economics surely dictates that higher fares will not encourage more people to travel by train. Train operators have to consider whether increasing off-peak fares is the best way to attract new rail passengers and fill spare capacity.

The absence of control over unregulated fares is a consequence of legally binding franchise agreements inherited from the previous Government. I regret that there is little practical scope for altering the current arrangements in the short term. However, we have made it clear that, when opportunities arise for negotiating franchises, the new strategic rail authority will ensure that arrangements are made to ensure that train operators structure and market their fares to offer value for money for their passengers, and to reflect the fact that our railway

is a national network, which needs to be marketed accordingly and in a way that encourages people to switch from car to train.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I should like to raise two issues on which my hon. Friend the Minister might care to comment. The first is the definition of "peak" times, which is a fairly elastic phrase. Secondly, the problem is not only what people pay, but the service they receive. The trains are now a worse-kept secret, and many people use the train only to be put off by the low-quality service they receive—for example, the train is overcrowded, or there is no buffet car. The two problems must be tackled together.

Ms Jackson: I entirely agree with my hon. Friend. In his own way, he underlines a point made by several hon. Members, which is that there has been a lamentable lack of investment in our railways, not only in infrastructure, but in rolling stock. We cannot drag back the wasted years, but we can, via the strategic rail authority, begin to ensure that investment is not only adequate in terms of amounts, but strategically placed, so that the improvements that everyone wants take place.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): Following the points raised by the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew), would the Minister care to comment on one of the many anomalies resulting from the way in which the rail service was privatised—the role of rolling stock companies? In my part of the world, many trains on branch lines run with only one carriage when there should be three or four. The Minister may correct me, but my understanding of what the service operators tell me is that they have no recourse against the three rolling stock companies that supply those shoddy services.

Ms Jackson: The hon. Gentleman introduces the subject of rolling stock companies. If I get started on that subject, any benefits the House has gained from the Adjournment starting sooner than expected would totally disappear. It was surely one of the most crass aspects of rail privatisation that the rolling stock companies were sold off at a fraction of their real worth, and entirely outside the regulatory system. Orders are now being laid, and new rolling stock will come on to our railways, but that is not before time.

The pieces of good news that I recounted at the start of my speech will be of little comfort to the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell, as many of his constituents have seen their fares increase by more than inflation. Last summer's decision by Wales and West Passenger Trains to ban cheap day returns to several popular holiday resorts in Cornwall might have made sense to the train operating company and helped it to manage overcrowding, but it is a bitter pill for passengers, many of whom are totally reliant on those rail services for their own essential travel. In addition, I very much doubt that high local fares benefit the Cornish local economy, dependent as it is on tourism and holiday travel.

I know that Great Western Trains has also made changes to its fares for journeys between London and Cornwall. I am aware of concern about the fact that saver tickets are no longer available for use on the popular 5.30 pm departure from Paddington—a point raised by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell. However, I understand that Great Western Trains has made arrangements to accommodate day travellers from Cornwall to London by other means, including a flexible all-day services day return ticket and the super advance fare.

I would be surprised and disappointed if train operators did not consider different ways of meeting the needs of their passengers, and providing them with good value for money for the journeys they wish to make. As well as meeting the fares regulation requirements, train operators must show the franchising director that they are improving their customers' satisfaction with the service and value on offer.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: As the rail regulator and Great Western will undoubtedly refer to this debate, it is important to make it clear that a day return from Cornwall is no substitute for a saver fare, because few people will make the round trip to London in a single day. The time is very limited. The only real option is the advance fare, and not everyone is able to make use of it.

Ms Jackson: It is entirely probable that the rail regulator and Great Western Trains will attempt to obtain a copy of the *Official Report* to read this debate. If they do not, I assure the hon. Gentleman that I shall certainly bring it to their attention.

Recent research has shown that, on average and in real terms, fares overall have been falling since privatisation. From January 1999, key fares such as saver tickets, unrestricted standard returns where there are no savers, and all standard weekly season tickets, will be capped at 1 per cent. below the rate of inflation. They will remain capped for each of the next four years.

In the London, Edinburgh and Cardiff areas, where there is significant commuting and the railways exercise considerable monopoly power, all standard season tickets and a range of standard singles and unrestricted standard returns are also capped. For non-InterCity London commuter fares, the fares cap can be adjusted further to reflect the quality of service provided by operators—a point made by the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell.

With the exception of Silverlink trains, the average permitted increase in London commuter fares has been capped below the rate of inflation, to reflect falling performance levels over the last year. That means a reduction in real terms for passengers. However, as many passengers have told me, they want reliability more than anything else: they want the train to be there when they arrive at the station, and they want to be sure that it will arrive at its destination at the advertised time.

Passengers expecting the usual January fares increase will have been surprised by Connex Rail's announcement last week that it would be reducing the cost of many commuter rail fares in the south-east. Connex Rail's decision should help to make rail travel more attractive and encourage people to leave their cars at home—and every hon. Member who has spoken this evening has stressed the desirability of that outcome. I strongly welcome that move, and I hope that it will mark the beginning of a trend to attract more passengers with value-for-money fares across the rail network.

I also welcome moves by train operators to promote discount fares such as Apex—I know that the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell does not share my

[Ms Jackson]

view of that method of selling tickets—and other advance-booked products to attract people to their services, particularly in off-peak hours, when space capacity currently exists. As a result, passengers are using the cheapest tickets more than ever before.

The take-up of journeys made by purchasing Apex and similar advance-booked tickets has increased by 40 per cent. in two years. Indeed, the increase in the average fare paid between April 1996 and April 1998 was only 3 per cent.—below the rate of inflation. Popular discount railcard schemes—the senior railcard, the young persons railcard and the disabled railcard—which allow reduced rail travel for holders have also been protected by the franchising director.

One of the obvious failures of rail privatisation has been the perceived lack of a clear, understandable, national fares structure. Although I welcome many of the new and innovative fares introduced by train operators, they have led to a multiplicity of different and frequently changing fares for similar services, with, in some cases, complex and varied conditions—for example, in relation to advance booking.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): I want to try to ensure that every hon. Member from Cornwall speaks tonight, so I shall relate to the Minister an experience that I had a few weeks ago when I was trying to book a ticket.

I waited in the queue for about 20 minutes with nothing else to do, so I decided to time the people standing at the full inquiry desks, where three clerks were trying to work out fares. That is difficult for the public to do. Even the clerks, poring over computer screens and huge books, were taking five to six minutes to deal with each inquiry. Surely there is a better method, whether it uses a paper or computer system. Inquiries about the best ticket for a particular journey must take less time. To stand in a queue for nearly half an hour, as I did, while clerks spend five to six minutes on each inquiry will clearly put people off travelling at all.

Ms Jackson: It may be of some comfort to the hon. Gentleman to know that the Association of Train Operating Companies is engaged in producing a high-tech system that will mean that the wait to which he was subject, and which many would-be rail travellers suffer, will be a thing of the past. I am in no position to say when that system will come on line, but it will do so. Of course, as I have said, that does not attack the problem of the multiplicity of fares and people's sheer inability to understand how they are arrived at, which we want to be addressed.

Mr. Baker: Before the Minister concludes—she seems to be coming to the end of her remarks—will she respond to my earlier point about the quality of response from national rail inquiries in dealing with the multiplicity of fares, which is diminishing so that they can meet their targets of answering a call on time?

Ms Jackson: The hon. Gentleman should have more faith—I intended to deal with that issue before I wound up. As he has pushed me, I say to him that we are disappointed that the rail regulator has had occasion, yet again, to impose stinging fines on the Association of Train Operating Companies over the failure of the national rail inquiries system. I have regular meetings with the association, and I assure all hon. Members who have spoken that I will raise with the association the issues that have been mentioned tonight.

I am concerned about the complexity that passengers often face when booking an apparently simple journey. The hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) related a direct personal experience of that. I am particularly concerned that there may be instances of passengers paying more than they should or receiving inaccurate advice about the service and routes they may use. As I said, we can do little to change the current fares arrangements in the short term, and I do not want to deprive passengers of many popular bargain fares that are now widely available. However, it is surely not too much to ask train operators to make sure that they correctly advise passengers on every occasion.

When I and my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Minister of Transport met train operators and Railtrack last month, we made it clear that we expect progressive year-on-year improvements from the industry starting over the next 12 months. Passengers want an efficient, reliable and reasonably priced rail service. I assure the House that we shall do everything in our power to ensure that train operators redouble their efforts to deliver a good service at a reasonable price.

I shall discuss with the train operating companies the issues that have been raised, including that of school parties, which the hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell mentioned. That could be addressed. There are considerations of capacity but, as the hon. Member for Bath, who I regret is not in his place, has said, Railtrack has failed adequately to invest in certain parts of the network. We have discussed the failure of the rolling stock companies to provide new stock.

Although we argued against rail privatisation, as did Liberal Democrats, we have to acknowledge that we are where we are. We have to move forward. Vast amounts of public money are still going into our railways. I was interested to hear that the hon. Member for Lewes has opted for our approach to this. Money put into roads was deemed by the previous Administration to be investment, but money put into railways was subsidy. We totally reject that argument.

For a variety of reasons, not least the environment and economic sustainability, we are committed to ensuring that our railways carry more passengers and more freight. We have made it abundantly clear to the train operating companies and to the entire railway industry that there is potential for a renaissance in our railways, but it will be achieved only by everybody working together. If we need to push and shove a little, the Government are determined to do that.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at five minutes past Nine o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 9 December 1998

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Road Traffic Reduction

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Betts.]*

9.33 am

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I am pleased to have secured this debate and to have the chance to question the Government closely on the aims of their transport policies. Everyone recognises the need to do something about congestion and traffic. The Government's recent White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone", and their consultation paper, "Breaking the Logjam", are welcome, and make constructive suggestions about how to improve public transport, increase cycling and achieve a modal switch. However, "Breaking the Logjam" has introduced an element of confusion about whether the proceeds from road user charging will be entirely given over to transport projects. To underline that point, I shall quote the document, which says that the Secretary of State will be given powers

"to require a proportion of the revenue to be paid to central government."

That does not sound as though all proceeds will be spent on public transport schemes.

I hope that there will soon be an opportunity—perhaps by way of another Adjournment debate—to discuss the most practical ways of cutting car use. Indeed, hon. Members may refer to such measures during the debate. I am seeking to establish the degree of the Government's commitment to achieving road traffic reduction. I want to ask crucial questions and, to ensure that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), is able to respond to them in detail, I faxed them to his office yesterday. I look forward to his comprehensive responses.

Labour fought the election promising that it would reduce traffic levels. Its promise—which appeared in its policy handbook, on the election website and in policy briefings—was that it would

"reduce and then reverse traffic growth."

It was clearly a two-stage promise: first to reduce traffic growth, and then to reverse it. The second stage of that promise was crystal clear.

Labour's White Paper was also crystal clear, if somewhat unsatisfactory. It referred to setting the framework to reduce road traffic growth. That does not deliver on the second stage of Labour's election promise. It is true that the Government have promised to reduce traffic in specific areas. Paragraph 1.35 of the White Paper says:

"We also want to see an absolute reduction in traffic in those places. . . . where its environmental damage is worst."

That is welcome, but it still forgets the earlier, clear promise to cut the total level of traffic.

Further impetus has been given to the need for traffic reduction by the findings of Sir Donald Acheson, the former chief medical officer, who has just completed his inquiry into inequalities in health. Sir Donald recommended further measures to reduce the use of motor cars so as to lessen health inequalities and social exclusion in three areas. He said that reducing traffic would

"decrease air pollution and probably also reduce road traffic accidents. The benefit of the decreases is likely to be gained most by people experiencing disadvantage."

That is true, and those suffering most disadvantage are the poor and the socially excluded. Sir Donald went on to say that reducing road traffic would also reduce deaths in young men, and would improve the health of ethnic minorities. He found that areas

"with high proportions of ethnic residents . . . are associated with a high rate of traffic accidents amongst children from some minority ethnic groups."

Will Labour keep both parts of the promise that it made before the election and reverse traffic growth? Will it heed Sir Donald's advice and reduce traffic, and put health first and cars second? I should also like the Under-Secretary to clarify statements made by the Deputy Prime Minister, and to explain apparent contradictions between those statements and others released by his Department. The Deputy Prime Minister has been admirably clear about his intentions in his current job. Shortly after coming to power, he told *The Guardian*:

"I will have failed if in five years time there are . . . not far fewer journeys by car. It's a tall order but I urge you to hold me to it."

After the publication of the White Paper, in the House, I challenged the Deputy Prime Minister specifically on his words in *The Guardian* and on Labour's promise to reverse traffic growth. He said:

"I agree to keep to that commitment: judge my performance in five years."—[*Official Report*, 20 October 1998; Vol. 317, c. 1071.]

I was pleased to hear him confirm his promises. However, since then, others in his Department have undermined that promise. Fourteen days later, the Minister for Transport in London in answer to a parliamentary question, said:

"in order to tackle the congestion and pollution that is caused by road traffic, we need to reduce the rate of road traffic growth."—[*Official Report*, 3 November 1998; Vol. 318, c. *458.*]

On 13 November, she wrote to me ostensibly to clarify what the Deputy Prime Minister had so clearly told me. However, the letter did not clarify it—it changed it completely, saying that Labour intended to reduce the rate of growth in traffic, although it stated that there would be an absolute reduction in traffic in those areas where the most environmental damage is done.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford) *indicated assent.*

Mr. Brake: The Minister is nodding his head, but the letter failed to restate the crucial second stage of Labour's election promise to reverse traffic growth so as to reduce

[Mr. Brake]

the overall level of traffic. On 3 December, Lord Whitty, the Minister for Roads and Road Safety, publicised a speech that he was making at the Chartered Institute of Transport. His press release yet again failed to confirm Labour's pre-election promise to reverse traffic growth. It did promise traffic reduction in some areas—again—but, as I have said, that does not deliver Labour's promises.

At the end of his press release, Lord Whitty introduced a new phrase. He promised:

"The New Deal for Transport and the two Road Traffic Reduction Acts will help to provide the framework for the Government's commitment to deliver a real reduction in road traffic."

The contradictions in his speech continued. In the third paragraph, he restated the formula that there would be a reduction in traffic growth, and an absolute reduction, but only in some areas; in the fourth paragraph, he confirmed that the Deputy Prime Minister's promise in regard to reducing car journeys had not changed.

Cynical people have suggested that that could be setting the stage for a ridiculous U-turn: that the Deputy Prime Minister aims to cut the number of journeys made, but will allow those that remain to become twice as long. If that is the case, the Deputy Prime Minister will not only look ridiculous, but still be breaking the promises that Labour made before the election, and the personal assurance that he gave me in the House on 20 October that he would keep both those promises.

Let me ask the Under-Secretary some more questions. Do the Government still intend to keep the promises given by the Deputy Prime Minister—in the House, and to *The Guardian*—to reduce traffic, or does the so-called clarification in the letter that I received from the Minister for Transport in London mean that those promises have been abandoned? Can the Under-Secretary confirm that—as the Deputy Prime Minister made clear in answering my question—the Government intend to reduce absolute traffic levels in the United Kingdom, and not just to cut the number of journeys without ensuring that that results in an absolute reduction in traffic? Can he confirm that real traffic reduction, as described in his Department's press release, means that there will be less traffic on our roads?

Let me list some pledges of support for traffic reduction given by other Ministers. I shall begin with the Under-Secretary himself. On 30 October 1996, he wrote to a constituent in order to

"just reiterate my support for traffic reduction, both locally and nationally."

After the election, in August 1997, he wrote to his local newspaper—the *Greenwich Mercury*, of which I have a copy here—

"I have always made my views clear . . . our overriding priority must be to reduce the total volume of traffic".

I stress the words "total volume of traffic." The Under-Secretary's position certainly was clear, but, as the White Paper has confused the issue somewhat, I ask him to confirm that that is still the case.

The Minister for Transport in London has also made her position clear, and, because of her particular responsibilities, has had far more opportunities to put her views on record. In Hampstead high street, during the run-up to the general election, she made it plain to her constituents that she supported traffic reduction; during the same period, she also signed early-day motion 289. Both declarations went further than what has been said by the Under-Secretary, as they expressed support for a target of a 10 per cent. traffic reduction by 2010.

Since taking her current job, the Minister for Transport in London has repeatedly stated her support for traffic reduction. During the passage of the Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Bill earlier this year, she restated that commitment no fewer than seven times. On Third Reading, she said:

"The country cannot continue as it is—there must be a reduction in road traffic."—[*Official Report*, 24 April 1998; Vol. 310, c. 1119.]

Will the Under-Secretary confirm that his colleague will keep those promises, and will go further than she did in her letter to me, which states merely that the Government will reduce the rate of traffic growth?

The Minister for the Environment told the "Today" programme in December last year that Labour would deliver

"a major change in the use of transport and the reduced use of cars and vehicles on the road."

He had previously told his constituents that he supported the same 10 per cent. targets as the Minister for Transport in London—and her early-day motion—although, unlike her, he had not signed the early-day motion, because of his position on the Front Bench.

Can the Under-Secretary confirm that the Government will deliver on those promises? As a Back Bencher in opposition, he was able to sign early-day motions, and did so—again, making his position very clear, and supporting a reduction in traffic.

The newest arrival at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale), also supports traffic reduction. Just two days before the general election, he wrote to a constituent who had asked for his views on a Bill to set 10 per cent. national traffic reduction targets:

"Many thanks for your letter . . . I would support such a Bill."

I have the hon. Gentleman's letter here. As a Back Bencher, he stuck to that promise, and, in further letters written in July and September, he told constituents that he had signed early-day motion 18 and assured them that he would support the national targets Bill on Second Reading. I have those letters as well. In the event, there was no vote, but the hon. Gentleman's intentions are clearly set out in letters to constituents. Will Labour deliver on his promises, and all those of other Ministers in the Department?

In the Labour party overall, more than 40 Ministers have declared their support for 10 per cent. traffic reduction targets. Eighty per cent. of Labour Members have supported those targets, and even more have declared support for traffic reduction without specifying a figure. Will the Government keep the promises made by all those Members of Parliament, or will they be abandoned by a policy that, rather feebly, aims only to reduce traffic growth?

Those questions are crucial. According to the very first paragraph of Labour's White Paper:

"the way we travel is damaging our towns and cities and harming our countryside."

That refers to current traffic volumes, not the even-greater volumes that we shall experience in future if the Government merely reduce traffic growth and ignore the damage that traffic is causing to our children, our industry, our health and our economy.

There is enormous support for traffic reduction. Support has been expressed by, among other organisations, the Townswomens Guild, the Womens Institute, the British Medical Association, the British Lung Foundation, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the National Asthma Campaign and the Childrens Play Council. The list goes on and on. The Government know that, because they received 7,300 replies to their consultation document on transport policy. Page 12 of "The Government's Consultation on Developing an Integrated Transport Policy: A Report" states:

"Almost everyone wanted to see a reduction in road traffic."

We need traffic reduction. In the wealth of statements that the Government have issued since the White Paper, we have seen endless variations on phrases using the words "traffic" and "reduction", almost always spoilt by the addition of words such as "growth" and "in some areas". However, the Department's press release of 3 December introduced a new word: "real". It stated:

"The New Deal for Transport and the two Road Traffic Reduction Acts will help to provide the framework for the Government's commitment to deliver a real reduction in road traffic."

My final question to the Under-Secretary is this. Does "real" traffic reduction mean an increase or a decrease in the amount of traffic on the roads in the United Kingdom? He ought to tell the people of Britain exactly what his Government are planning, and not hide behind even more ingenious and tortuous phrases that avoid making their plans clear. He should answer this question, yes or no: does the Government's "real reduction in road traffic" mean fewer cars on our roads?

9.48 am

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on the eloquence with which he has put his case for traffic reduction, which is the crucial environmental issue of our time. However, his case was undermined by his all-pervasive cynicism about the motivation of every Minister, past and present. I am sure that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, my hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) will put him right in regard to the Government's motivation.

I also think that the Liberal Democrats would help their case more if they were consistent across the country. One of the major planks of Government policy—a policy instigated by the last Government—to secure traffic reduction is the fuel price escalator. Liberal Democrats in certain parts of the country are always saying that that is fine for urban areas, but not acceptable for rural areas. I feel that, if the Liberal Democrats wish to present a consistent policy nationally, they should not only put the case for their own areas—as they do, quite legitimately—but start talking to their colleagues who represent rural areas, and who do not yet seem convinced of the argument for the fuel price escalator.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Can the hon. Gentleman produce any evidence at all showing that increasing fuel prices affects the way in which people use their cars?

Mr. Chaytor: If the hon. Gentleman looked at work by the transport studies unit at Oxford university, he would find considerable evidence.

The real issue in rural areas is rural poverty. Not applying the fuel price escalator to rural areas does little about the core problem of rural poverty, which is far better addressed by wider economic policies and by the adjustment of standard spending assessments in the local government settlement to give an advantage to low-income families in rural areas and to compensate for the effect of any fuel price increase.

I shall be brief because I know that other hon. Members want to speak. I want to reiterate the arguments for road traffic reduction, however we define the precise means by which road traffic is reduced. First, it is critical that we reduce road traffic for reasons of mitigating pollution. We have accepted stringent targets following the Kyoto protocol. As a Government, we have put forward even more stringent targets voluntarily to meet targets on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Cutting the use of the private car is one of the crucial means of reaching those targets.

Secondly, we have to reduce congestion to improve the quality of life for people in urban areas. The most recent report about traffic speeds in London tells us that, in some parts, the average speed of the private car is 10 miles an hour. That is no different from the average speed of vehicles 100 years ago. What is the purpose of developing the technology and that vast industry if all we are doing is clogging up the roads and turning our motorways into moving car packs?

Thirdly, we have to reduce traffic for reasons of health. Everyone is now aware of the chronic rise in asthma cases, particularly in urban areas. There is a direct relationship between the rise in road traffic and the rise in asthma and other respiratory diseases. Fourthly, we have to reduce road traffic for reasons of efficiency. It is not economically efficient to move people around the country in the way that we do, with such domination of the private car and with the consequent traffic jams, delays, missed appointments and additional expense.

I congratulate the Government on their latest statement, yesterday's Green Paper, which fulfils their promise to introduce action specifically on business parking in town centres and city centres and which gives local authorities the power to introduce congestion charging. Those are two admirable policies that further progress the Government's action, although there is more to do. There are three points particularly that I should like the Government to take on board. I am sure that many hon. Members would agree with me on those.

First, it is regrettable that, as yet, we have not extended the principle of taxation on town and city centre car parking spaces to out-of-town supermarkets. One of the most disastrous social and economic developments of recent years has been the rapid growth of huge out-of-town hypermarkets, which destroy the lifeblood of many of our small town centres and shopping centres. The point is that we do not have a level playing field because, in most small town centres, there is a car parking charge,

[Mr. Chaytor]

but there is no car parking charge in the huge out-of-centre hypermarkets. The overwhelming majority of hon. Members would argue for a level playing field to give town centres a chance of survival, particularly small traders in town centres.

Secondly, I urge the Government to look again at the company car tax regime. Everyone knows that the way in which the system operates provides incentives for company car owners to do more mileage. The system has to be changed. The thresholds have to be adjusted to provide an incentive to do less mileage.

Thirdly, I ask the Government to look again at the fuel tax escalator. It was brought in at 5 per cent. a year by the previous Government. It was increased to 6 per cent. a year by the present Government. Since then, oil prices have fallen to their lowest level since 1970. Is the 6 per cent. a year rise having sufficient effect, given the fall in oil prices, and the increased fuel efficiency that enables motorists to get more miles per gallon out of modern vehicles? The level of the fuel tax escalator needs to be kept under constant review.

An additional point relating to the fuel tax escalator is that it is a progressive tax, the reason being that 30 per cent. of the population are not affected by it. Thirty per cent. of the population do not own vehicles. By and large—there are some non-car owning families among the professional and managerial classes, but not many—it is the poorest third of the population who do not own vehicles. Therefore, they are not affected by the rise in petrol prices.

Wealth can be defined by not only the ownership and usage of vehicles, but the miles travelled by the vehicle. The richer a person is, the more likely it is that that person will own one or more cars and travel large distances in those cars. Therefore, the application of the fuel price escalator is a progressive measure in taxation terms. I appreciate that progressive taxation is not attractive to all hon. Members, but it should be to Labour Members.

For 100 years, we have defined the growing wealth of society in terms largely of the growth in material possessions and the motor car is the central material possession. We have defined our gross domestic product according to the number of motor cars produced. Our GDP increases the more cars we produce. It also increases the more car alarms and anti-theft devices we produce.

Is the dominance of, and reliance on, the motor car as a central economic indicator a sensible way in which to define the wealth and prosperity of society? That is not an issue for this debate, but it should be taken up in another debate. The time has come to review the way in which we define GDP. It is time that we considered other things in measuring the wealth and prosperity of a nation, the level of crime and the quality of the environment being two prime indicators that should be included.

I welcome the debate. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington has raised important points and asked important questions. I congratulate the Government on their achievements to date, but there is much more work to do.

9.58 am

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): I had some sympathy with the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), as he listened to the past two speeches, as the Government are in a tangle because of manifesto commitments somewhat recklessly dispersed. I can understand the Minister for Transport in London, on the pavement, according to the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake), saying those things. As someone who went to that constituency in the last general election, I know that Hampstead high street is completely jammed seven hours a day. As people came up to her, complained and said, "What are you going to do about it?" she would say, "Oh yes. We are committed to traffic reduction," just as Labour was committed to reducing animal experiments in laboratories. It is having a bit of a problem on that commitment, too.

I will tell hon. Members how to reduce traffic: engineer a recession. That will reduce it fast enough. The first indicator of economic recovery is always a rise in traffic volumes. Traffic can be reduced in the same way as cash flow into supermarkets or holiday bookings with tour operators can be reduced: ensure that less money is circulating.

Of course, hon. Members do not really mean that they want to reduce traffic. They do not want to stop people moving about; certainly the Government could not possibly want to stop people moving about. What they mean is that they want to reduce use of cars because, for various atavistic reasons, socialists and interventionist liberals do not like the motor car. They want public transport, and what is public transport? It is assembling a group of total strangers, putting them in a metal container, making them start from a starting point that was not their choice and conveying them to a destination that is inconvenient.

There was something to be said for trying to improve public transport and raise standards while it was genuinely public but, thanks to measures taken by the Conservative party—but not when I was in this place—there is no longer any such thing as genuine public transport anywhere. It is simply a monopoly that is determined to extract as much profit as possible from those who use it. As a result, quality has not improved. If anything, it has fallen because, instead of a monopoly dominated by the trade union movement, so one could not complain, and run for its convenience, there is now a monopoly run to enhance the profit of shareholders—those who own so-called public transport, by which I mean the metal containers that convey total strangers from destination to destination. Therefore, public transport is as dirty, squalid, inefficient and unreliable as it was in the old days. Public transport is a complete chimera.

I have read with great anxiety that some of the taxes that are to be levied on cars will be hypothecated to local authorities, which will be directed to use the money for public transport. In other words, it will be used to enhance the profits of Stagecoach, Branson and so forth, at the expense of imposing great inconvenience on the car owner and private individuals who like to get about under their own power, according to their choice and at their convenience by making the best use of technology.

The hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) mentioned pollution, and his argument was valid. The pollution generated by old cars is probably high. The Morris Minor, which is the most favoured transport of the sandal-wearing brigade, generates far more

pollution than a modern Audi and is also extremely difficult to drive while wearing sandals—I have tried it and it is dangerous.

I shall listen with care to the Under-Secretary's reply, as he has quite a juggling act to perform. Everyone wants to reduce traffic in their immediate vicinity, naturally. All our constituents want to "reduce traffic" in particular locations within the constituency boundaries. However, people do not face up to the principal element of the argument, which is that traffic volumes are an indicator of economic prosperity. The argument is used as a cover for getting at the car.

The fact is that car use emphasises everything that is congenial and acceptable in today's political climate. It has elements of freedom, choice, mobility, convenience, technology and, I admit, elements of a certain competitive consumerism, which is highly economically generative, as the hon. Member for Bury, North said.

Naturally, hon. Members have every interest in ensuring that car use is responsible. We are here to legislate for that. However, we cannot legislate it out of existence, or even attempt to do so. If the Government do, they will not only add enormously to the economic burdens felt by practically every citizen, but—as the Under-Secretary and his colleague the Whip are probably aware—in the long run, they will make themselves electorally extremely unpopular.

10.4 am

Mrs. Teresa Gorman (Billericay): Far be it from me to try to elaborate on the description that my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) gave of public transport, but another inconvenience of travelling by that means is the chance that one has in winter of catching a nasty cold or some other disease. That always happens to me when I use public transport.

I am amazed at the sanctimonious humbug talked on these occasions and I think of the old adage, "Make me pure, O God, but not just yet." If we ask people who speak against the motor car how many their family owns, they usually um and ah, but admit finally that they have one for themselves, of course they use it only occasionally, one for the wife, who only goes shopping in it, and one for the other grown-up members of the family, who use it only in the evening.

It is true that this country has a large number of private cars, but when I have discussed the subject with, for example, Ford and have asked, "How can you possibly sell all those new cars?" I am told that people buy them not merely to drive but as status symbols. The car sits on the front drive, the neighbours admire it and everyone knows that one is going up in the world. That is part of the joy of owning a car.

Although there are, apparently, 20 million cars on our roads, they are not all on the road at the same time—far from it, some hardly leave the garage except once a year for a visit to relatives at Christmas, for example. The number of cars owned is irrelevant to the amount of use to which they are put. Everyone knows that one can buy a good used car, which someone has owned for a year but which has only 90 miles on the clock—a bargain, I believe.

An awful lot of nonsense is talked on the subject and there are a lot of myths. First, on the pollution myth, particulates—the little bits of stuff that come out of the exhaust—emitted by modern motor cars have been reduced by about 90 per cent. Modern technology is such that motor cars will soon not pump much out of their rear ends apart from fresh air. Of course, there will be some products of combustion but, as I have said so many times in the House that I feel I am almost becoming boring, carbon dioxide in the atmosphere amounts to such a tiny quantity that it is not a great threat to our atmosphere and environment.

Mr. Chaytor: If the hon. Lady really believes that carbon dioxide levels in the environment are no threat, can she explain why all nations are conscious of the need to act against greenhouse gas emissions? Why did they meet 12 months ago in Kyoto to negotiate a difficult programme of action and two months ago in Buenos Aires to negotiate the further details of means by which they can reduce emissions? Does she completely reject the argument that greenhouse gas emissions cause an unacceptable build-up of carbon dioxide and impact on global warming and climate change? Who else in the world shares her view?

Mrs. Gorman: A great many scientists share that view. There are about 300 parts of carbon dioxide to 1 million in the atmosphere, which is the equivalent of throwing a sugar cube in Loch Lomond. Carbon dioxide has been targeted because it is a product of certain industrial activities that people dislike, so it is an easy substance to blame. Water vapour is far more important as a so-called greenhouse gas, but no one complains about that as it is obviously foolish to try to do anything about it because water covers three quarters of the globe. Perhaps we should have the science lesson on another day.

We talk about our streets being congested, but everyone knows that it is easy to get around at certain times of day. It is not congestion but congestion of use that is the problem. During the school holidays, we can all drive much more freely because mothers are not taking their children to school. We must devise ways to spread traffic and one way is road pricing—an idea that never seems to be taken up because it is deemed to be difficult to implement. I know people who will not cross the Dartford bridge because they have to pay £1. They would rather go all the way round to save £1, which tells us that drivers are price sensitive. If they were required to pay for the amount of road used on a journey, it would make them decide whether that journey was necessary.

I shall briefly describe the experience in other parts of the world, as I have lived in the United States, Canada, Mexico and Australia and I often travel to the continent, for example to Germany, and have taken an interest in traffic problems for years. For example, New York did away with parking meters in the heart of the city, which meant that traffic could flow freely. Anybody travelling through Soho or Mayfair or the centre of any city in the day will see narrow roads with parking meters on both sides, reducing access to a narrow central lane. They must think that we are crazy because we are blocking our arteries for the sake of a few measly pounds. I know that Westminster city council regards the revenue from parking meters as a nice little extra, but it is not necessary or sensible to allow parking on our streets.

Most people who live in New York do not own cars. They use public transport during the week—mostly taxis—and hire cars at the weekends. That is the way of life of the well-to-do in some big cities.

[Mrs. Gorman]

Many cities in Germany do not allow lorries to stop between 7 am and 7 pm. There is no parking, no long-term deliveries and no stopping for five hours while builders put up scaffolding. All that has to take place during times when roads are less busy. Staggering the use of the roads reduces the problem. That is another sensible example. Instead of using the roads on an ad hoc basis, we should spread their use over different times of the day.

The lorry industry is having a bad time at the moment because of the fuel tax here. Fuel is very much cheaper on the continent and we are pricing our lorry drivers out of business. There are something like 250,000 lorries in British ownership, but far more come from the continent every day bringing large quantities of consumer goods, food and so on.

I use the M2, which runs from Dover to London and is crowded with lorries travelling nose to tail, all going into central London in the middle of the day. Although lorries are relatively few compared with cars, they are huge. I made some inquiries of the lorry owners and the big companies that use them. They told me that, because the great new lorries that are part of the EU requirements are so enormous, it is now cheaper to keep the goods on the lorries and keep them moving around our roadways 24 hours a day. In the old days, they took the stuff to a warehouse where it was unloaded on to smaller vehicles and taken to delivery points. We have created a position where lorries are moving around our main highways 24 hours a day because it is cheaper than stopping and unloading the cargo for distribution in small vans, perhaps at more convenient times.

We are not using our roads sensibly, so we can reasonably complain that congestion is difficult to manage at certain times of the day. I congratulate the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), on the number of red routes in his constituency. I have written to him to congratulate him on the one from Blackheath to New Cross. I hope that it is extended. Many of the main arteries into the centre of London become congested during the day because they have only single yellow lines. Taxi hire firms keep all their vehicles waiting along the road, half a dozen people are loading and unloading, somebody is putting up scaffolding and somebody else has popped down to the corner shop for a packet of tea. All that traffic is allowed to congest and disturb our roads, so it is not surprising that we have these debates from time to time.

Finally, our country is not covered with roads. If all the towns and streets were whacked together, they would represent only 15 per cent of the land mass of the United Kingdom. Therefore, we are a country that is largely rural and there is still plenty of space. The hysteria that we hear whenever anybody wants to improve the roads in Britain should be dealt with sensibly by setting out the facts.

We should have more and better roads. The lunatics in some Labour boroughs who widen the pavements for no good reason, and just reduce the space for motorists, ought to be curbed. We should come to terms with the fact that, these days, people prize their freedom and independence which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea said, is represented by their ability to jump in the car and take the family out for a nice day in the sun, or, for women, by the convenience of not having to drag bags of shopping from the local high street home on the bus. I remember doing that as a young woman and I would not want to go back to it. I use the out-of-town hypermarket precisely because it is so convenient and I hope to goodness that none of these curmudgeons are ever allowed to stop those developments. I hope that the Under-Secretary, who has the powers to make good and sensible use of our roads, will apply common sense and not the hysteria and humbug that we hear in attacks on the motorist.

10.16 am

Mr. Matthew Taylor (Truro and St. Austell): We have heard some interesting speeches being made with genuine feeling, although I disagree with some of them. The hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) said that the Liberal Democrats had not consistently supported the fuel price escalator. We have always taken the position that as the fuel price escalator produces more income, it will provide the opportunity to cut other taxes. I have always used that equation. We have argued that vehicle excise duty should be abolished for two thirds of vehicles—all small-engined vehicles. The Government decided to increase the fuel price escalator, although they could well have argued that they did not have sufficient room to manoeuvre as the existing fuel price escalator plans had been budgeted in for forward spending. In increasing the fuel price escalator, they could have applied a joint equation, but they did not. I consider that to be a failure because of my wider concern about environmental taxation becoming unpopular if it is used simply as a way to increase taxes.

I agree with the hon. Member for Bury, North about charging for parking at out-of-town shopping centres. I regret that that proposal was removed from the White Paper at a very late stage. I represent some rural market towns that suffer considerably as a result of out-of-town developments that were allowed by the previous Government, on appeal, against the wishes of the local community. They have had an enormous impact on town centres, particularly St. Austell, which is now very run down.

I also agree with the hon. Gentleman that we need to keep the fuel price escalator under review. Although the Conservatives now kick up a lot of fuss about it—despite the fact that they introduced it in the first place—it has not had a measurably large impact at the pump, simply because the raw material price has been falling. If the price of the raw material rises and there are sharp increases at the pump, there will be strong public opposition to that and to the tax. Perhaps we should consider an escalator system that ties into the fuel prices at the pump rather than a simple percentage. It may be easier for the Treasury and the Government in terms of forward planning, but it may not produce the outcome that they seek in either direction. It may not lever up fuel prices gradually as intended; they may go up too fast or not at all, depending on the raw material costs.

The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) suggested that socialists and interventionist Liberals were anti-car. I am not. I like cars and I like driving, but I do not like traffic jams, congestion and pollution. If we are honest, we all know that we sometimes use the car when we do not need to, but perhaps more often we are forced to do so when we do

not want to. Out-of-town shopping is a good example, as is the lack of public transport in some areas for getting to work.

The hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) referred to the number of cars which is a real problem in urban areas. In towns such as Truro, traditional terraced streets do not have the capacity for people to park outside their homes. The problem will get worse and will change the way in which people use cars. Quite irrespective of Government policy, the convenience of the car is considerably diminished if people cannot park outside their homes, and that is already causing fights. People put bollards outside their homes to stop people parking and neighbourhood disputes break out, yet the current level of car ownership is relatively low compared with the number of adults who could potentially own cars and say that they would like to in future. However, for the most part this is a debate about car ownership, not about car use. The hon. Member for Billericay acknowledged that.

Mrs. Gorman: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Taylor: I will not, because the hon. Lady spoke a moment ago. I have not said anything with which she would disagree and I am conscious of the time. She mentioned road pricing, which I will come to.

I want to anticipate an attack that we have heard previously from the Conservative Front Bench, although we have not heard it, interestingly enough, from the Back Benches today. The Conservative Front-Bench team has swung around entirely on its previous course and now puts itself up as the great opponent of the road fuel price escalator. When challenged on that, spokesmen say that it is the 1 per cent. that Labour has added that makes the difference, but in all their propaganda, they talk about the fuel price escalator as a whole. For the record, over 18 years, the Conservatives increased excise duty on fuel by 600 per cent. Between 1992 and 1996 alone, they raised £58 billion from fuel tax, of which £25 billion directly resulted from the imposition of the escalator.

In addition, the Conservatives sold off public transport services, took no action to stop the loss of rural bus routes and cut the money for transport packages for local authorities. They introduced deregulation of bus services, which has been an abject failure in improving rural bus services, which continue to decline. Privatisation of the railways has brought increased fares, massive increases in the number of complaints, massively increased overcrowding and, as the regulators themselves say, deteriorating services in many areas. The fuel price increases were not used to improve public transport services. Rail fares increased by 50 per cent. and bus fares increased by 40 per cent.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that during most of the period when we were increasing fuel excise duties, road fuels in this country were cheaper than on the continent, whereas now they are significantly more expensive, which is beginning to create market distortions? I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman's party was in favour of harmonisation of this sort of thing, being a pro-federalist party. When does the hon. Gentleman think that the fuel escalator ought to come to an end? No other country in the EU has a fuel escalator and if we keep it indefinitely, it will create more and more of a distortion.

Mr. Taylor: The previous Government did not give a timetable for ending the road fuel price escalator. It was budgeted in for the whole of the current period under Conservative plans. If it is now the policy of the Conservatives to stop it, perhaps they should say why it was not their policy before the general election and how they would make up the huge budget deficit that would result. I presume that they would do so by cutting the health and education improvements that have been made, which is, of course, what they have said they would do. However, they have said that they would do it to meet an existing tax deficit, not a new one.

The fundamental answer is that all countries, especially European countries, are now committed through the Kyoto agreement substantially to reduce carbon dioxide emission increases in Europe. Countries will have to follow paths that lead to reductions in fuel use. I congratulate the Conservatives on pioneering the road fuel price escalator. It is rather pathetic that they have reversed their position to court popularity now that they are out of office. I believe that they will find that the policy will be adopted by other countries.

Road traffic reduction has overwhelming support in this place, as has already been said. It has overwhelming support among Labour Members, let alone support from the Labour Front-Bench team in the past. I trust that if a road traffic reduction Bill with national targets was introduced, the Minister would not use his offices or the offices of the Labour Whips to prevent its being passed. No doubt there would be negotiations about the detail. There might even be negotiation about the target, but there should be no negotiation about the principle of road traffic reduction because it was a specific commitment in Labour's manifesto.

The arguments in the House have moved on a long way from when road traffic reduction was first proposed by the hon. Member for Ceredigion (Mr. Dafis) in 1994. We then saw local targets introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster). The House is now far more in agreement on such issues, but the remaining areas of concern—economic damage, unrealistic targets and the possible regressive nature of traffic reduction—are still spoken about. It is our job to present the counter-arguments.

We have to remember that almost one third of households in Britain do not own a car. The majority of those people are poor, sick, disabled or elderly. The process of cutting unnecessary traffic growth and investing in public transport directly benefits those very poor people. In rural areas, we see some of the highest levels of dependency on cars and some of the highest levels of inability to afford them and of people without a car. The policies that have promoted the car have a direct and materially devastating impact on people in rural areas. If we introduce measures to make it less necessary to travel, such as more support for local schools and shops, and better planning so that road use is not built in as estates and shops are developed, we make it easier for people in both rural and urban areas to drive less. However, the main target of road traffic reduction will be urban areas.

[Mr. Taylor]

I welcome the fact that the Government have built road traffic reduction into the London government Bill. It is crucial that that works; it will be a pioneering effort. If it is done right, it will show that more can be done across the rest of the country, so we give that measure support and we look for more. We hope to see a Bill for the rest of the country soon, but above all, we hope that the Government will stand by their manifesto pledge and back national road traffic reduction, not simply a reduction in the growth of road traffic.

10.26 am

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): I apologise to the House for not being here at the beginning of the debate. I declare an interest in the Register of Members' Interests. I am chairman of a small Irish medium-tech company that counts cars going in and out of car parks. That is not relevant to the debate, but it is worth putting on the record. The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) spoke about the railways. One of my brothers-in-law runs a railway company.

It is worth noting that the increase in the use of the railways has not come from the provision of extra railway lines. We are going to have more railway lines. We have had many more stations opened in the past 10 years than probably at any time in the past 80 years, but it is worth noting that it is possible to achieve greater transport use without creating more infrastructure. The people who have looked on the roads debate as one that suggests that the increase in the number of roads has led to an increase in the amount of traffic have got it completely wrong. Growth in traffic and in movement comes in the main from prosperity and from emancipation.

In the 1930s, the people who had cars were white, middle-aged men in full-time occupations. As soon as pensioners, students, ethnic minorities and women start to have their own car, people start to say, "Let us bring in a system of road pricing." Such a system would cut out the pensioners, the students, the poor, women and ethnic minorities. We are left with white, middle-class men in full-time occupations with a fistful of fivers in their back pocket who can continue driving. That is one of the reasons why direct charging in a conventional sense is wrong.

The debate today is not about road pricing; it is about road traffic reduction. I am one of those who has supported road traffic reduction Bills from the beginning, in part because it is the kind of thing that I supported when I was a Minister at the Department of Transport 13 years ago. This Government go around sloganising and saying that the previous Government went in for predict and provide. We did not. We built only some of the roads, which were essential. We did not go around building roads that were merely convenient.

For example, anyone who claimed that the Okehampton bypass was just a desirable thing did not understand what the problems were there. In some of the London boroughs, town centre bypass schemes, often strongly desired by local authorities, help to provide civilisation for people who otherwise have to compete, when they are shopping, going to school, going to church and living, with through traffic. Traffic, whether on railways or roads, should be, in effect, in traffic canals. That helps to reduce risk and improve the environment.

How can we sensibly reduce road traffic? Let us assume that Britain continues to grow at 2 per cent. a year for the next 100 years. That implies a material standard of living seven and a half times greater than now. Keynes told us that in his piece "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren", published in "Essays in Persuasion". We ought always to remember that, even at 2 per cent. growth, which I argue is slightly below trend, many more people will be provided with the opportunity to own many more things. They will be able to own more homes and more cars, go on more holidays and do all sorts of things that are denied to many of them now. But I am talking about them not about us. We have a five-storey car park in the House of Commons. I am talking about the people whom we represent, who are among those who make 60 per cent. of their journeys on foot. My hon. Friend the Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) asks why we widen the pavements; it is probably to make it more convenient for those who use them.

When people start talking about benefits from congestion charging, they should remember the example of the City of London. What level of road pricing would have been needed to achieve what sensible traffic planning achieved in the City with the so-called plastic bollard approach, which would have been implemented even without the IRA bomb? What level of charging would have excluded private traffic from Oxford street where, even now that there are only taxis and buses, pedestrians can move faster than traffic? The answer is not simply to charge.

One of the biggest changes since I became a Member of Parliament in 1975 is that most teachers then did not drive to school, whereas now most teachers do; then, most pupils were not driven to school, whereas now most are. Instead of telling pupils that they should not be driven to school, we should ask how we can identify the proportion of teachers, governors and pupils who come to school in ways other than by car and so have the figures, year by year. Then, we can start thinking about incentives: for example, if we go on improving schools, more people will go to the school that is nearer to them, instead of to one that is further away.

Perhaps we should do as the all-party cycling group suggested last evening and, instead of making pupils who go home by bike wait for 10 minutes until all the cars have gone, let pupils on bikes go 10 minutes early and hold back the pupils who will be collected by car. We can use small market signals such as that. It would certainly be worth putting on the national news the impact of the cycling provision in Oxford, which has led to almost a 40 per cent. reduction in cyclist casualties even before the extra benefits of having cycling helmets and reasonably well-maintained bikes are taken into account. In all those ways, we can begin to make a difference.

I have proposed before that the gates of the House of Commons car park should be locked, at least for one day a year and preferably for a week a year.

Mr. Chaytor: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Bottomley: I think that the hon. Gentleman must have his car parked here.

Mr. Chaytor: To pick up on the hon. Gentleman's point about the House of Commons car park, does he

agree with me and a small number of other Members of Parliament that it would be entirely consistent with Government policy if a charge were imposed on car parking spaces in the House of Commons car park?

Mr. Bottomley: Perhaps, but I suspect that hon. Members would find some way of including the charge in their office cost expenses.

We have done one good thing in getting rid of the crazy system, which I opposed when it was first introduced, under which the bigger a Member of Parliament's car, the greater the mileage allowance given. We must remember that, if we point a finger at someone else, three fingers will point back at us, so we should first try the measures ourselves. For example, rather than ask the Fees Office to disclose the exact mileage claimed by each Member of Parliament, it might be a good idea to publicise the number of miles that Members of Parliament as a group claim each year, and then try to ensure that that figure decreases. It would be marvellous if the Deputy Prime Minister, instead of getting publicity for stopping to help elderly couples who break down on the motorway, got publicity for helping pensioners with suitcases to get down from a train. There are all sorts of individual measures we could take, but we should try them out ourselves first. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) said, people like cars. I have nothing against cars—indeed, our household has two.

Unless we recognise the need for mobility of those who do not have access to a car, we shall not achieve our underlying goal of increasing people's well-being, which is a mixture of wealth and welfare, and helping them to have choices. In the City of London are some of the better-paid people in this country, yet 80 per cent. of them come to work by public transport, not because they cannot afford to drive—indeed, they are more likely than other people to own a car—but because it is not in their interests to drive. The option they take is a better option than driving. We must fix on that, for if our aim is to aid the mobility of those to whom choice is currently denied, we are far more likely to develop an attractive alternative for individuals who currently have a choice, but who too often choose to use their car.

I would caution the House against swallowing measures that are merely a passing fashion. An example of that is the Greater London lorry ban, which was introduced in the mid-1980s. As my hon. Friend the Member for Billericay said, in a rather perverse way people were told that they could not use the roads 24 hours a day and make their deliveries at suitable times. To be exempt from the lorry ban, a firm had to fill in a 10-page document; 20,000 firms did so, so 200,000 pages were filled in. Those documents had to be read by the checking authority and, if approved, the firm got an exemption. Two thousand signs were put up; the scheme cost £250,000 to begin with and, by its end, was costing £750,000.

The number of lorries that were denied an exemption was four. The Greater London council did not even bother to discover that until I got someone to ask the question. In the last month of the life of the GLC, it gave out the information that the number of lorries that did not get an exemption was four. I would not accuse the Government of putting on such a gloss, because they have not been in office for long enough, but if they start doing that sort of thing, they will be subjected to the same sort of inquisition. They must find better ways to make progress.

In my view, we can make progress in reducing the growth in traffic and, in many cases, we can reduce the amount of traffic. However, we shall achieve that only by introducing sensible measures that work, not by doing things to get a short-term round of applause.

10.36 am

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): I hope that I do not start my speech by embarrassing my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) with a piece of one-upmanship, but my family is only a one-car family and I have taken to cycling around London. Doing so saves quite a lot in taxi fares and allows me to feel that I am doing my bit to improve conditions in central London.

The hon. Member for Truro and St. Austell (Mr. Taylor) balanced the ticket for the Liberal Democrats in the usual way, by saying that he was pro-car when their policy is obviously anti-car. I do not recommend that he sends his speech to A-level students in his constituency, because they might spot some of the inconsistencies in his answer to my question.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) on obtaining the debate. I thank him for sending his questions in advance to the Minister, if only because it will be interesting to see how the Minister starts the process of getting out of some of the more ridiculous commitments that the Labour party made in opposition. It underlines the cynicism of new Labour that its leaders were prepared to make manifesto commitments to achieve utterly ludicrous objectives, when any sensible person would have known that it is unrealistic to aim for overall reductions in traffic volumes nationally.

The flexibility of the United Kingdom labour market has a great deal to do with people's being able to travel longer distances to work. The lifeblood of the economy is the ability to transport goods: whatever one's prejudices about the high street versus the out-of-town shopping centre, there is nothing one can buy in either a high street shop or a hypermarket that has not arrived by truck. It is ludicrous to suggest that we can return to buying local produce in local markets, because that would significantly reduce the quality of what was available. No Government will choke off economic growth by simply legislating for a reduction in traffic, and it is difficult to imagine how that aim would be achieved even if they did so.

The Government are having a go at gesticulating in front of their original objectives, but the fuel duty escalator, which they have increased, will not deliver. Research produced by the Centre for Economic and Business Research suggests that it would be necessary to increase the cost of petrol to £17 per gallon before it started to have any significant impact on traffic volumes. In the meantime, it would be the most vulnerable road users who were driven off the road, such as women in second cars and pensioners, who are one of the fastest-growing road user groups. The last thing pensioner couples in particular want to give up is their car. Low-paid people—particularly those in rural areas—who need to use their cars will be driven off the roads. They will lose their jobs and end up on benefit. Other groups, such as the disabled, who have no alternative but to use their cars will have to pay the excess fuel duties that the Government have levied.

The previous Government had to introduce the fuel escalator, but this Government have imposed substantial new taxes elsewhere—such as the £5 billion a year

[Mr. Bernard Jenkin]

pensions tax. The Government's first two Budgets have imposed the largest peacetime taxation increases seen in this country. It is ludicrous to plead that those increases were necessary: the Government have simply lost control of public expenditure.

In their manifesto, the Government spell out the legitimate and beneficial objective—which we support—of cutting congestion and pollution. That should be achievable, but the problem requires proper analysis. There has been virtually no growth in inner-urban traffic. The hon. Member for Bury, North (Mr. Chaytor) has pointed out that road traffic speeds in central London are virtually the same as 100 years ago, and the same probably applies to the volume of traffic in inner London. The growth of inner-urban traffic in London is not the problem. By aiming at relatively small market segments in their transport policy—such as the school run and the journey to work—the Government are not tackling the real problem of traffic growth.

The document published yesterday by the Government, entitled "Breaking the Log Jam", starts from the completely wrong premise. It is introduced with a totally dishonest prospectus. Let us analyse the sequence of events properly. The first document produced as part of the Government's great transport policy was the comprehensive spending review. The Secretary of State was prevented from issuing his White Paper until the Chancellor had had his say and got his way in the spending review, which cut transport investment. The previous Conservative Government spent an average of £1 billion a year over five years on motorway and trunk road infrastructure improvements. This Government have cut that sum by two thirds, to only £300,000 a year. Only one bypass will be started in this financial year when there are all sorts of very good environmental reasons for building bypasses all over the country.

Mr. Alan Clark: That is a very interesting—and absolutely disgraceful—statistic. As a consequence of the Government's policy, more people will be killed on the roads. It has been established by every relevant statistic that one could encounter that motorway journeys are the safest mode of travel. By restricting the growth of motorways, the Government will ultimately and indirectly raise the number of road deaths.

Mr. Jenkin: My right hon. Friend makes an extremely valid point. The Government are also benefiting from reduced rail subsidies—one of the dividends of privatisation. In addition, they are phasing out Treasury support for the tube.

Those measures were announced in the spending review. The Government then released the White Paper and recently published the Greater London Authority Bill, which contains skeleton provisions regarding congestion charging. They have also delivered a consultation paper—yet another one—on that issue. Even though the Government assume in the comprehensive spending review that they will collect revenue of £1 billion a year by 2005, that consultation paper asks who will pay congestion charges and how they will be collected. It is no surprise that Friends of the Earth has described the Government's transport policy as a case of "carry on consulting".

The Secretary of State has clearly been rolled over by the Treasury. The congestion and car parking charges will not mean extra money for transport. *[Interruption.]* I have clearly excited the Minister—I must have touched a raw nerve. That extra revenue will not mean extra money for transport; it will merely make up for the cuts. The tube cannot survive without a degree of subsidy. The Conservatives subsidised the tube to the tune of £400 million a year. The extra charges will simply transfer the tax burden for subsidising the tube from the Treasury to the motorist.

There will come a point when motorists—who already contribute more than £30 billion a year in taxation through fuel duties, value added tax and so on when less than one fifth of that money goes to transport—will begin to question whether the Government have produced a fair and proper transport policy. The Government are using the urban congestion argument as an excuse for collecting more taxes—the revenue will not go to transport—because they have lost control of the social security bill and have no welfare reform programme. That was evidenced last night with the introduction of the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill.

As if finally to give the lie to the assurance that the extra money from the new charges and taxes will go to transport, paragraph 6.30 of the paper to which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred says:

"the legislation will not restrict expenditure entirely to transport related matters".

The objective should be not so much reducing traffic overall, but cutting congestion and pollution, which was Labour's manifesto commitment. That makes sense, and we will seek to hold the Government to that commitment. We do not have excessive traffic overall, but too much of the wrong traffic in the wrong place. There is unsuitable traffic on unsuitable roads. While traffic growth in inner-urban areas is virtually nil and the volume of traffic is growing in suburban areas by 2 or 3 per cent. a year, there is real growth in inter-urban traffic. Yet the Government have not produced a single policy item to deal with or reduce that growth in traffic.

Where is the long-awaited consultation paper on land use planning that was promised in the White Paper and foreshadowed originally before the election? Labour has been in office for 20 months and we still have no guidance as to how to improve land use planning. I put it to the Minister that that is the hardest nut to crack. We will look positively at any proposals that he might produce—but, as yet, there are none.

How is improved land use planning consistent with the Government's strategy to build 2 million new homes on green-field sites by 2016—each one a pretty little box with a double garage? It is ridiculous to suggest that so much green-field development is consistent with reducing traffic growth. We need to divert traffic to more suitable places. I recently drove down the A3 to Winchester.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: Portsmouth.

Mr. Jenkin: I beg your pardon—I did reach the correct destination. There is a dual carriageway virtually all the way to Hindhead, a single carriageway through Hindhead and then a dual carriageway again. It is not rational to have no bypass around Hindhead, but the Government do

not have the money to build one. They are presenting their transport policy as rational when it has clearly been screwed by the Treasury.

Privatisation presented huge opportunities to develop alternatives to the car, such as rail transport. For example, English, Welsh and Scottish Railway Ltd. plans to treble the number of rail freight movements in the next 10 years. There is huge investment in Railtrack. However, we need new investment in roads as well, and the roads system must be managed better.

The environment must be a prime concern when formulating transport policy. If we are to protect the environment, we must also protect economic growth. The White Paper raised great hopes, which have now been dashed. Those involved in commenting on and formulating transport policy—that is a great many people—are extremely disappointed by the dithering, delay and endless consultation that is the Government's excuse for inaction.

The Government have no authority. There is no transport legislation in the Queen's Speech. All we have had are cuts in the roads programme which will increase congestion and pollution, and at the next general election, voters will judge the Government's transport policy on whether it achieves cuts in pollution and congestion.

10.50 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): The debate initiated by the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) has addressed an issue that is at the heart of the Government's policies to tackle traffic congestion and pollution. His concerns that the Government are backtracking on our commitments are completely unfounded. I wish that he would spend more time considering all the actions that the Government are taking rather than resorting to extraordinarily detailed textual analysis designed to try to prove that there might be some possibility of backtracking. I assure him that there is not. Our objectives are unchanged.

The Government's recent White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport", makes it clear that we need to do more than just reduce the rate of traffic growth. Where the problems of pollution and congestion are greatest, we need to achieve an absolute reduction in traffic levels. More importantly, we are making good progress in implementing the policies necessary to deliver on our promises.

Mr. Brake: I want to be absolutely clear on this point. I want the Minister to put on record whether the Government's policy is to achieve an overall, absolute reduction in traffic. Yes or no?

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman ought to contain himself. I am trying to answer several questions that he gave me notice of and asked in his speech. I have just said clearly that we do not regard a reduction in the growth of traffic as sufficient. I have stressed that in areas that have serious congestion and pollution problems, we must achieve traffic reduction.

I put it to the hon. Gentleman that in other areas of the country—some of them are represented by his hon. Friends—there is no need to achieve traffic reduction because vehicles are not causing serious pollution. There are rural areas where that is the case, where the motor car is a lifeline and where there is no great environmental or other reason for pursuing traffic reduction. There is a need to tackle the serious congestion and pollution problems in cities, and that will be at the forefront of the Government's policy.

It is right to have regional and local strategies rather than blanket policies at a national level which are not sensitive to local considerations. I should have thought that the hon. Gentleman would be the first to recognise the importance of well-developed local transport plans, worked out by local authorities and local communities in response to the specific needs of their area. That is precisely what we are seeking to encourage.

In our first 18 months in office, we have published and taken significant steps to implement the first comprehensive White Paper on transport policy for more than 20 years. It is the first White Paper to integrate transport policies with other key related policies on the environment, land use planning and health. The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) complained, on the one hand, about us producing too many consultation papers and, on the other, that we have not yet published a consultation paper on the changes to PPG3. I have to tell him that changes to PPG3 will be announced shortly. The Government take that matter seriously and recognise the need for integration of land use, transport and environmental policies. We created the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions to achieve that integration.

We have also secured in the comprehensive spending review the means to deliver our integrated transport strategy with an extra £1.8 billion over three years for public transport, traffic management and road maintenance.

The Deputy Prime Minister has made it clear that doing nothing is not an option. Congestion is costing our country billions of pounds a year. The Department's 1997 road traffic forecasts made clear the scale of the future challenges that we would face without the Government's policy changes. Traffic was forecast to increase by more than a third over the next 20 years. That would seriously undermine our ability to achieve our legally binding Kyoto targets on CO_2 reduction. It would also set back action to tackle local air quality and the adverse impacts on people's health of the way in which we travel. It would lead to significant worsening in congestion.

We must not forget the three in 10 households that have no access to a car. They are totally reliant on other forms of transport such as public transport, cycling and walking.

Our policies aim to encourage more responsible car use and to extend the choices available to all groups in society. The White Paper sets out how we will achieve that.

The Deputy Prime Minister said last year that we want to be held to account for our achievements in reducing car journeys. That position has not changed. The White Paper promises that we will report on the success of the new deal. The two recent road traffic reduction Acts provide a specific framework for reporting progress in tackling road traffic and its impacts at local and national level.

Our policies will encourage people to drive less and to walk, cycle and use public transport more. They fully address all the recommendations of Sir Donald Acheson

[Mr. Raynsford]

on mobility, transport and pollution, to which the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington referred. Our approach is based on integrated policies with action at national, regional, local and individual level to deliver the reductions in traffic that we need.

I want briefly to highlight some of the key policies that we are implementing which will make a difference. The first is local transport plans. Delivery of our objectives depends, to a large extent, on action at a local level to tackle local needs. That is why the new five-year local authority local transport plans are at the heart of the new deal. They will be comprehensive, integrated transport strategies. They will contain measures to co-ordinate and improve local transport provision to tackle congestion and pollution, and support economic development in urban and rural areas.

London boroughs will have to produce local implementation plans giving effect to the mayor's integrated transport strategy for London. Production of the strategy will be a key priority for the mayor in his or her first few months in office.

We are providing authorities with the additional resources to do the job. We have secured an additional £700 million over the next three years for the implementation of local transport plans. We are removing unnecessary constraints on how local authorities can spend the money allocated to them.

We published draft guidance on local transport plans on 12 November. We are encouraging authorities to set targets so that we and they can judge performance. Clearly, if targets for road traffic reduction are to have any meaning, they need to be considered in the context of local transport strategies setting out how traffic growth can be tackled. We are, therefore, implementing the Road Traffic Reduction Act 1997 in step with implementation of local transport plans.

We have listened to the concerns of local authorities about the time scale for the preparation of robust plans. We have asked for provisional plans by the end of next July and full five-year plans in 2000. Authorities will submit their statutory traffic reduction reports as part of the first full local transport plans in 2000 and produce non-statutory interim reports as part of their provisional plans. That phased implementation will enable a greater degree of standardisation to be achieved in the local measurement of existing traffic levels and forecasts so that the national implications can be assessed. As I am sure the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington will recognise, it is critical that there is a standard approach so that we do not have varying figures for different areas which are difficult to co-ordinate.

We shall give local authorities important new powers to allow them to charge road users or to introduce new charges on workplace parking as part of the package of measures in their local transport plan. In London, it will be for the mayor to consider the role of such measures as part of the integrated transport strategy. We propose to give powers to the boroughs as well as the mayor, but borough powers would need to be exercised in line with the mayor's strategy.

The Greater London Authority Bill, published last week, includes the necessary powers to enable such charges to be introduced in London. We are committed to the introduction of those powers nationwide. Yesterday, we published a consultation document seeking views on the details of how such schemes might operate.

Revenues raised will be used locally to benefit transport serving the area where charges apply. Investment in improving the alternatives will be critical to the success of schemes in reducing traffic.

To tackle road traffic growth, we need to widen the choices available for those who have a car and those who do not, so we are improving the alternatives to the car. Public transport is crucial but so, too, is the need to encourage walking and cycling, and that is on the Government's agenda.

I want to address the question of national road traffic targets. The Road Traffic Reduction (National Targets) Act 1998, which became law in July, requires the Government to report on the case for national targets for road traffic. The Government must also publish further reports on progress in reducing the impact of road traffic and towards any targets set. We have said repeatedly that we will produce our first report on the case for targets by the end of next year. That is an entirely reasonable time scale given the analysis that we need to undertake. I referred to the preparation and co-ordination of local plans. We need that analysis to assess the impact of the new deal's measures on traffic.

We have also set challenging targets on, for example, CO_2 emissions, air quality, cycling and road safety—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order.

North-West Region

11 am

Ms Hazel Blears (Salford): I am delighted to have been successful in the ballot for today's debates and to see so many colleagues here. We are about to debate a subject that is of tremendous importance not only to those of us who represent the north-west in Parliament but to the country as a whole, because the north-west is such an important region, economically and culturally.

The north-west has the second largest economy in the United Kingdom. It is one of the most densely populated areas—5.5 million people live in Lancashire, Cheshire, Cumbria, Greater Manchester and Merseyside. We have 140,000 businesses and currently benefit from £370 million from the European structural funds, which we would like very much to keep. We also have £375 million from the single regeneration budget challenge fund.

Although manufacturing has declined in recent years, it is still a major source of output and jobs in the north-west. It accounts for 27 per cent. of the north-west's output and 22 per cent. of its employment. Our manufacturing is concentrated in four main sectors: chemicals, textiles and clothing, food products and engineering and, of course, the very important aerospace industry.

Manufacturing has been hard hit in recent months, which is why it is so important that the regional development agency should begin its work of drawing investment into the region, preparing its business plan, setting up strategic sites, and working with the regional chamber of commerce and all the local authorities.

Time and again, it has been shown that partnership is the key to economic success and to social regeneration. In the north-west, we have a tremendous record of working together to achieve results. In Greater Manchester, the city pride project involves Manchester, Salford, Trafford and Tameside working together to regenerate the city-centre core. MIDAS, the new Manchester investment development agency service, is drawing jobs and opportunities into the area. We are all working together to bring the Commonwealth games to the region, which would be of enormous benefit economically.

Some regions say that they do not feel close-knit or that they do not have a real affinity with their neighbours. That is certainly not the case in the north-west, where we share our history, language, literature, geography and, I believe, our sense of humour. That is why the north-west needs a voice as a region. I want a democratically elected regional government to shape and focus our growth and development, bringing decision making closer to the people and the communities that we serve.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): How many letters has the hon. Lady received asking for an elected authority for the north-west?

Ms Blears: We have been consulting the communities, and many say that they want decisions to be made at a local level. The hon. Gentleman might be in favour of remote government, but I am sure that that is not popular in his area.

I was talking about being closer to the people, and I want to say a little more about what is happening to regenerate my city of Salford, which is becoming more exciting by the day. The past 20 years have not been especially happy for Salford and its people. We based our economy to a large extent on manufacturing and full-time, high-quality jobs, but the Tories put paid to all that.

We had two devastating recessions which decimated manufacturing and knocked the heart out of many local people. However, in the 18 months since the Labour Government were elected, we have begun to see a revival in the city's fortunes—a new beginning. I hesitate to say that there is a Salford renaissance, but that is how it is beginning to feel.

We have an education action zone and a health action zone, and we have pathway status for our regeneration projects. I shall give a couple of examples of local partnerships working on the ground—real regeneration from the bottom up. Just last week, we submitted the action plan for the regeneration of Seedley and Langworthy, one of the most difficult communities in Salford. The bid was for £25 million for the city as a whole but focused on that particular area. The bid contains some genuine innovations which could inform regeneration projects on a wider scale.

One proposal is for a community housing company, whereby local people decide on the design, management and lettings of property and have a stake in the growth of the community. Another proposal is for a community trust, again led by local people, which will be an agent to draw in funds and resources from the new deal, Europe and elsewhere to provide jobs and opportunities.

Most exciting of all, there is to be a community financial institution. Banks and building societies have withdrawn completely from the inner cities, so there is very little access to financial services in those areas. We are to have our own community financial institution—a people's bank, if you like—which will provide loans and start-up grants to local businesses and bring financial opportunities back to the inner city. That is what sustainable improvement is all about. It is not about being here today and gone tomorrow; it means improvement, week by week and month by month, changing and growing, so that once again the community becomes strong, self-confident, vibrant and caring—somewhere where people are proud to live and where they want to bring up their families.

We need to tackle the problems of private rented property and absentee landlords who do not have a stake in the community. I want the Government to examine the regulation and licensing of private landlords to make sure that they meet their social responsibilities to the communities in which they have property.

We have to invest in community capacity. We have various regeneration projects, but we are asking the same group of local people to get involved. People have their own lives, families and jobs, which makes it difficult for them to participate in a range of projects, so we need to glean the necessary skills and talents from a wider group of people.

We need real, joined-up government. We have all the various initiatives, but we cannot have people spending time on administration and bureaucracy only to find that they are bidding against each other for funds. We have to ensure that the different initiatives mesh and integrate. We shall then have the opportunity to show that we can provide the best value for the extra money that we invest and can renew the fabric of the communities forgotten by the Tories.

[Ms Blears]

I shall highlight a couple of other local projects, the first being the development of the Lowry centre in Salford. It is the national landmark millennium project for the arts, involving £127 million of investment. It is unique in bringing together funding from the national lottery, the Millennium Commission and Europe—a real partnership which, in 2000, will deliver the most wonderful, breathtaking cultural centre anywhere in Britain.

Just last week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport topped out the centre with the final golden bolt. He was awe-struck, not only by the building itself, but by the concept of bringing together a performance space for large productions—there is seating for 1,750 people—a flexible studio theatre, galleries for Lowry's paintings, a digital world centre, and a centre for virtual reality linked with the university. The final accolade was the receipt of £2 million in sponsorship from Electronic Data Services, a major information technology employer. That is initiative and enterprise.

I pay tribute to Salford city council, which had the ability and vision and was prepared to risk taking the project forward. The best return on that risk will be the fact that local people, especially children and the young, will be able to take part in, enjoy and appreciate performance and art. Salford is packed with creativity and talent. At long last, we have a Government who recognise that and want it to flourish.

Our examples of regeneration are quite breathtaking. Salford Quays now employs more than 7,000 people, more than when the docks were operating at their height in the 1950s and 1960s. The latest development is Century 105, the north-west's newest commercial radio station, which is investing £2.5 million in a high-tech studio and creating more than 50 jobs. The metrolink extension goes through Salford Quays into Eccles. There is a major project with English Partnerships to regenerate Chapel street, which is the main A6 corridor into the city.

Only last week, we announced the building of the only five-star hotel in the region, which will bring jobs for local people. We are also examining the possibility of a popular music centre in the Chapel street area to build on the creativity and talent of local people. There is also a housing and leisure development at the old hospital site. There is a huge development at Chapel wharf with the Calatrava bridge, which has won international awards, and 2,200 staff are based at the new Inland Revenue headquarters.

In fact, some £875 million of capital investment, public and private, is planned for Salford over the next five years. That could support up to 35,000 local jobs. To cap it all, there is an application to build a snowdome in Salford—who would have thought there would be skiing in Salford? It is hard to believe, but it is true. That, too, will provide jobs and opportunities for local people.

A few weeks ago, some out-of-date research was published. It compared Salford to the Titanic, alleging that people were leaving the city and abandoning ship. That research is nine years old—from the depths of the third Tory term, when our city was at its lowest. Today, nothing could be further from the truth. The city is becoming an exciting and vibrant place in which to live and work.

I do not have time to say everything that I want because many colleagues want to speak, but I shall say this: north-west Members are a force to be reckoned with. We shall be working together for our region and the people whom we are here to represent. We shall be ensuring that the north-west's voice is heard at the very heart of government. We know that our Government want to encourage regeneration; we have made a wonderful start. We will be watching very closely to ensure that that regeneration continues, for the benefit of north-west people.

11.11 am

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): I am grateful to be called so early in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on the enthusiastic way in which she gave a one-person commercial for Manchester and Salford. Judging by the number of her hon. Friends who surround her, I am sure that she would be the first to admit that the north-west does not comprise only Manchester and Salford. Although she is brimming with the natural enthusiasm of a new Member under a new Government, I respectfully remind her that the development in Salford Quays, together with many regeneration projects in Liverpool, Trafford Park, other parts of Manchester and all over the north-west, began under the previous Conservative Government.

I must also remind the hon. Lady that the previous Conservative Government introduced a broad-scale scheme known as city challenge, in which we provided money on a co-ordinated basis to places such as Blackburn. Her rather selective retailing of what is happening now does not properly reflect some of the measures that we undertook when in government. I would be the first to admit that I wish that we had done more. I do not think that there is a party difference between us on the need to invest more resources in dealing with the many problems in inner cities and urban parts of the north-west, although the hon. Lady perhaps gave the impression that the previous Government did nothing.

It is a little rich for the hon. Lady to talk about economic and industrial matters without mentioning the burdens with which north-west industry has had to cope since this Government came to power: high interest rates, a high pound, pressures on manufacturing industry, the advent of things such as the social charter, and so on. I shall not dwell too long on those matters. Suffice it to say that the idea that the north-west and its business suddenly hit calm, tranquil waters on 1 May 1997 is a travesty.

I would not necessarily have expected the hon. Lady, who advocated the benefits of Manchester and Salford, to mention the north-west's most important industry: aerospace. [HON. MEMBERS: "She did."] I apologise if she did; perhaps she did not go into it in quite as much detail as I should like to. Aerospace is one of this country's most dynamic industries. It underwent a difficult period in the early 1990s, but is now working positively for the future.

The hon. Lady will be aware of British Aerospace, the importance of civil aviation to the north-west's economy and the generation and development of civil aviation through new technology. When I asked the Minister for Energy and Industry at Question Time last week for a straightforward answer to a question about the civil aviation research and demonstration programme, which brings £20 million to bear on seedcorn development, all I heard was rubbish. So interested was the Minister in giving me a sensible answer that all he could say was, "We are doing more than you were doing."

I wanted an answer to that question because the programme represented the seedcorn funding for much of the work that developed the airbus wing. The hon. Member for Salford will know the importance of the airbus wing to British Aerospace's work. I hope that the Minister will give a straightforward answer on the Government's intentions. Without such technological development and such a lead, many of the hon. Lady aspirations for the north-west economy will not be fulfilled. I should like assurances on the matter.

Mr. Phil Woolas (Oldham, East and Saddleworth): In the light of the right hon. Gentleman's comments on the north-west business community, does he recognise the strong—indeed, unanimous—support among north-west businesses for the region's submission on regional government? Have not businesses throughout our region been strongly supportive of the creation of a regional development agency because they recognise the role that such an agency can play in the regeneration of our communities?

Mr. Jack: From the companies to which I have talked, I do not sense a great deal of enthusiasm about this issue—but then business is pragmatic: it would not turn up its nose at new channels through which resources can be directed for the benefit of the north-west. The proof of the pudding will be in the eating—when RDAs start their work. There are some problems on the horizon. There will be tremendous competition between RDAs for every one to be a winner and a success. They will also face competition from a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly. They will be hard pressed to match some of the successes of regional appeals which the previous Government were able to deliver.

Will the Minister reassure me that one of the most crucial factors in ensuring that technologies in the north-west aerospace industry remain at the forefront for the benefit of its regeneration is FOAS—future offensive air systems? A great deal of work is being undertaken in some new technology development at the margin—unique in this country, and, in fact, in Europe. Without continuing Government support for such programmes, which the UK and French aerospace industries are exploring, our north-west industry will not be able to remain at the forefront of technology. It is important that the Government reassure us that they recognise that, because the north-west aerospace industry accounts for 40,000 jobs.

Last week, there was a debate on seaside towns, of which the north-west has quite a few. One of the most important is Blackpool. Since we are debating matters connected with regeneration, I should like an answer from the Minister to a question that has been bothering me.

One factor that might be inhibiting further development of the Blackpool and Fylde coast is the blight that has hung over the area for some time as a result of North West Water's inability to achieve recognition of its meeting the European Community bathing water directive standards.

In late September, the Minister for the Environment made some pretty strong comments, amplifying some of the problems and ignoring work to be undertaken as a result of the investment of a further £100 million by North West Water in projects approved by the Environment Agency to enable the waters to meet the bathing water standards, so removing a blight from the Fylde coast and sending the signal that it is a good place for a family holiday. Which schemes does the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning support and believe will do the business for the north-west's principal tourist location? It is easy for the Minister for the Environment to rubbish the Fylde coast at the Labour party conference. The damage to a very important part of the north-west economy caused by such ill-considered comment is serious and must be addressed in today's debate.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): My right hon. Friend will doubtless recall how keen the Labour party was to stop holding its party conferences in Blackpool, which has had a serious effect on Blackpool.

Mr. Jack: Indeed. My hon. Friend will be aware that a new private sector partner has bought the facilities, including the Winter Gardens. The fact that more money will be invested will be a testimony to private enterprise, but it will also be a test of the Labour party—will it be prepared to back Blackpool again when the new facilities are installed?

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that, at the end of the 1980s, when North West Water said that it did not consider further treatment of sewage on the Fylde coast necessary, and said that it would simply build a longer outfall pipe to put still-polluted sewage into the sea, Lancashire county council fought a major campaign, supported by the European Commission? As a result, treatment is starting to be implemented on the Fylde coast. That programme is not yet complete, and tertiary treatment may be required, but does the right hon. Gentleman recall that he, and the Government of whom he was a member, refused to accept that any further treatment of sewage was necessary on the Blackpool coast?

Mr. Jack: In a spirit of reckless generosity, I was hoping to agree with some of what the hon. Lady said, because, as leader of Lancashire county council, she was a doughty fighter for an important development on the Fylde coast. I would fall out with her only on the last part of her intervention, because she is right, in a sense. All of us, on both sides of the political spectrum, had to battle with North West Water to persuade it that the long sewage outfall was not the answer. I remember that we won that battle, but that progress could not have been made had we not privatised the water industry. We occasioned £500 million of investment—now £600 million—to deliver the systems which, I hope, will lead to a solution for the Fylde coast.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): In fact, the Select Committee on the Environment went to Fleetwood to consider the argument made by Lancashire county council, and held an evidence session on that at Rossall point. The Government changed their opinion on long sea outfalls for the whole country as a result of that inquiry and the campaign that had been fought.

Mr. Jack: The hon. Gentleman bears out my point that the success in getting that investment made was the sum total of the parts. The former leader of Lancashire county council may be distorting history slightly in taking all the credit.

[Mr. Jack]

I shall now talk about the transport infrastructure in the north-west of England. Although it is absolutely right to explore every opportunity to make the best use of all modes of transport and, whenever possible, to move freight on to the rail system and to develop our rail system, all that the hon. Member for Salford hoped for for the north-west may be more difficult to achieve if the Government do not seriously consider the condition of the M6. To suggest that the Birmingham northern relief road will solve all the problems of that vital transport corridor is to ignore reality.

Some people suppose that our position on the western side of the United Kingdom, when the majority of our export business goes to Europe, puts us at the wrong side of the country. We must not give the impression abroad that we are in any way cut off because the M6 is becoming an almost intolerable route. That would be the worst thing that we could do. The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning smiles, but those who use that motorway know that it is a nightmare road at times. I hate to think of the environmental damage being done by vehicles stuck in endless queues on that motorway, and of the loss of business time because the capacity of the system is not big enough and there are no plans to develop relief for some of the pinch points.

Mr. Andrew Miller (Ellesmere Port and Neston): I could not agree more with the thrust of the right hon. Gentleman's argument, but why, under the Administration of whom he was a member, was there no investment in the west coast main line or—more important, and more relevant to the specific point that he is making—in rolling stock for the freight industry? Ludicrously, we are still in the situation that we inherited from his Administration: V6 engines leaving a very successful Vauxhall plant in Ellesmere Port are being exported to Europe by road because his Administration left no rolling stock for the freight industry.

Mr. Jack: In reply to the first part of the hon. Gentleman's intervention, sadly, the investment that should have been made in the west coast main line depended on the tilting train working, and it did not. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] I always try to be fair. If there is a fault, those of us who were part of the previous Government should acknowledge that. However, because the tilting train did not work, all the railway investment went to the east coast main line.

Yes, there may well have been a dearth of investment in freight, but we should consider the progress that English, Welsh and Scottish Railway, the new freight company, is making in its purchase of 300 locomotives and new specialist facilities. Had freight services remained nationalised, none of that investment would have been possible. It is a pity that the hon. Gentleman is not prepared to acknowledge the benefits that have already flowed to the north-west economy—its routeways and roads—as a result of the transfers to rail freight that EWS is making. The Conservatives set the industry free.

I do not want to go into details, but I hope that, when the Minister reflects on the debate, he will not forget the importance to the region of agriculture, especially horticulture. The horticulture industry still employs a large number of people. If the Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, Lord Donoughue, read the comments regularly made in *Grower* magazine, he would understand why the Government have a poor reputation in the horticulture industry. It is time that the Government developed a proper strategy for the development of the industry, because it is vital to the north-west.

I close on a point about the human capital of the north-west—its people, whose ability or otherwise to make an economic contribution reflects the condition of our health services. At present, a small group of people is inhibited from making its contribution to the economy because of the poor state of renal services in the Royal Preston hospital. I should like the Minister to convey to his friends in the Department of Health my earnest wish that the work being undertaken by the Department of Health and by Sir Leslie Turnberg in a review of regional services—including renal services—in Lancashire, will gel together to enable an early decision to be taken on the need to expand renal services in Preston. The people who are affected by the current pressures on those services might be able to make a better contribution to the north-west economy if decisions were taken on the expansion of those services.

I hope that I have been able to paint a broader picture of the north-west economy, drawing attention to some of the challenges that must be met by hon. Members and Ministers if we are all to ensure that the north-west region, which we represent in the House, prospers in future.

11.28 am

Mr. Colin Pickthall (West Lancashire): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on securing the debate. I shall persuade my wife to read her speech in *Hansard*. Perhaps she will then stop pestering me to take her to Paris, and instead we shall nip down the East Lancashire road and visit Salford. It would be an awful lot cheaper.

Undoubtedly, after years of neglect of the north-west, there is now a steady overall improvement, which is continuing, despite the trading difficulties experienced by much of manufacturing industry. I welcome the strides that the Government have taken, but I shall draw attention to many issues that should be addressed to allow the momentum of economic improvements to gather pace.

One of the things that most irritates me as I look back on the past 20 years is the tendency of Government in London to regard deprivation and social exclusion as primarily a matter to be addressed in the inner cities. Deprivation and social exclusion also exist in smaller towns—those that have lost traditional industries, such as textiles, or suffer from levels of disadvantage similar to those of inner Liverpool or inner Manchester.

Towns such as Barrow, Burnley, Preston, Rochdale, no doubt Ellesmere Port, and Skelmersdale in my constituency do not receive the automatic attention that they deserve. It is true also, as the right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) said, that the incidence of social exclusion and economic failure in rural areas is not negligible. Systems to tackle that difficulty are only just being devised.

It is important to remember that Cheshire, Lancashire and Cumbria are predominantly rural areas and that they are about to lose their objective 5b status. Skelmersdale

is a town of about 45,000 people. It experienced some of the most violent effects of recession during the Tory years. In recent months, the tide seems to have turned for the town. Unemployment, which was more than 13 per cent. when the Tories left office, is now down to 8.7 per cent. However, that is still twice the national figure.

The economy in Skelmersdale is becoming more exciting and stimulating. New businesses are moving in to the extent that we have run out of industrial and commercial business land. Investment in Skelmersdale is growing rapidly and that is due to three factors. First, it is due to regional selective assistance and assisted area status. Secondly, the local partnerships that have been formed have been tremendously successful, largely thanks to the energy and intelligence of West Lancashire district council, in this context at least. These are the partnerships between businesses, public agencies, community groups and the county council. Thirdly, there is the expansionist mood of several key industries in the town, to which I shall refer.

Assisted area status as we know it is up for significant change, and Skelmersdale is in danger of losing it. Most of west Lancashire is in the Liverpool travel-to-work area; it is on the northern edge of Merseyside. Many workers move in and out of Merseyside and Skelmersdale for their work, which makes more sense as their travel-to-work area than a Lancashire countywide area would. To use different criteria for designating assisted area status for Skelmersdale would damage a town that has, as I have said, twice the national rate of unemployment. It would damage also the local partnerships which have hitherto been very successful in attracting continuing investment into the new town.

Other problems have been created by the way in which Department of Trade and Industry grants have been used to underpin foreign investments in some new plant in the region. We all welcome such new investment in the region, but it seems foolish to put taxpayers' money into, for example, a new paper mill in Trafford Park. I wish no harm to Trafford Park and its development. However, A and M Paper in Skelmersdale has invested huge amounts of its own money in expansion in the town, and Kimberly-Clark has similarly put massive investment into a paper mill in Barrow, and each of those indigenous firms will find themselves in regional competition from heavily subsidised rivals.

The same is true of a firm called Europanel in my constituency, which makes Contiboard. It faces competition from a Portuguese firm, Sonae, which has been subsidised to move an identical factory in Kirkby, about four miles away. It will operate in a sector of production in the country that is already oversupplied. I know that the DTI is not the responsibility of my hon. Friend the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning, but in my view the DTI should tighten up on those investments, and I hope that that will be a function of the regional development agency in the near future.

The north-west is one of the country's premier agricultural areas. Two thirds of the region is rural. It is the region that was most damaged by the BSE tragedy. Cheshire and Cumbria—particularly Cumbria—were hard hit by it. Similarly, Lancashire has many pig, poultry and egg producers. They are again in deep recession. My right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has had some remarkable successes in Europe and in his negotiations with British retailers, all of which have been deeply appreciated by the agricultural community in the north-west. However, the depression in the industry is still with us. It spreads outwards to have an effect on rural life generally in the region and it is unlikely to be resolved for some months.

Each of the factors to which I have referred adds up to a compelling case for the RDAs to get cracking as soon as possible and for the Government to start planning for full-blown regional elected government. The RDA must get a grip, perhaps sector by sector rather than area by area, of the strategic planning for the north-west. That would help us avoid unhelpful decisions about the assisted area map or about DTI grants, which can damp down regeneration in the north-west's most disadvantaged areas.

Equally, the RDA must, as a matter of urgency, tackle the region's transport infrastructure. I agree absolutely with what the right hon. Member for Fylde said about the M6, through Lancashire particularly, and about the west coast main line. It is clear that the mixture of private rail and coach companies is entirely unable to sort out transport in the region. That must be a job for the RDA.

In my view, the RDA must impose on itself a rural filter. A rural representative on the board is not enough—indeed, it might be counter-productive. Every decision that the RDA makes should be viewed in the context of how it enhances or diminishes the lives of people on low incomes, especially those living in rural areas, as well as how it enhances or diminishes the rural environment.

Above all, the RDA must reflect all the region. It will be too easy for it to be dominated by Manchester. I say that with all due respect to Manchester, which has a lot of muscle. I accept that it would be strange if it did not use that muscle. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will consider closely the composition of the board to ensure that it properly reflects the entire region. I hope also that in the not-too-distant future we shall start examining regional representation in the new House of Lords, further to strengthen the north-west in that place.

Finally, I suggest to the Minister, who I know has his heart in the regions and in regional development, that he will receive huge support from the 64 Members of the north-west parliamentary Labour party in his work towards the development of RDAs and regional government. The Opposition have been making many noises recently about the terrors of our moving towards a Europe of the regions. Speaking for myself, I would positively welcome such a move. I think that there are tremendous advantages in the regional structures that our European partners have and of which we are deprived. I look forward to the strengthening of those structures in the not-too-distant future.

11.38 am

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): I am grateful to be able to contribute to the debate. I must offer congratulations to the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears). The hon. Lady has not quite persuaded me that Salford is a tourist destination, but she has done very well as a start.

My constituency is tucked in the extreme south-east corner of the north-west region. However, I assure the House that there is a strong sense of identity and community over the issues that affect the whole region.

It is perhaps worth emphasising briefly the context in which the region finds itself and what has happened to it over the past two decades. If we are considering the coal

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industry, the steel industry, the textile industry or even investment in the rail industry, we must recognise some of the difficulties that have had to be overcome and some of the wounds and bruises that have been left on the regional economy. It is perhaps no surprise that within that context, there have been major population shifts and changes. A recent estimate is that the population of Merseyside is set to decline by about 10 per cent. and that of Greater Manchester by 2 per cent. in the next census period.

At the same time, as the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) has said, our connection to Europe has become more and more important. Therefore, I shall devote the rest of my contribution to examining how we might exploit and develop that connection and how we might heal the wounds and bruises to which I have referred. The hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) intervened to ask how many letters had been received about an elected regional development agency. I have received the same number of letters about that as I have about the setting up of single regeneration budgets. Stockport council has sought vigorously to participate in the SRB process, but—like many other public bodies and institutions in the north-west—has become snagged in a nightmare bidding regime. That is an inheritance from the previous Government that I hope that this Government will get rid of as quickly as possible.

Stockport made bids in three consecutive years and spent more than £100,000 on bids that were unsuccessful. We have now got some single regeneration budget money and we are grateful for it. However, when the council submitted in priority order the 27 projects for the reduction of class sizes that it believed should be supported by the Department for Education and Employment, the Department took no notice of the council, its education experts and the head teachers, allotting the money apparently on the random rolling of the dice. That is another example of the bidding system failing to support investment in the north-west in the most appropriate and targeted way.

The citizens of Stockport contribute £30 million a year to the national lottery, but they do not receive anything like that—

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): It's a lottery.

Mr. Stunell: They do not receive that amount in prizes or projects. The national lottery receives 20 bids for every one that is successful. We should end the bid culture and bring back to our region the responsibility for taking decisions about spending resources.

The Liberal Democrats are very pleased that we are to have a single regional development agency for the north-west. Regional accountability is important, and we want to see the development of an overall economic strategy for the north-west. Is the Minister yet able to announce the membership of the RDA? We expected to learn that in October, but we have not yet done so. The RDA must swing quickly into action, but how will it be linked to the training and enterprise councils? We need to consider carefully how to develop training in the north-west. I remind the Government that if we seek successful models of regional development, both Spain and Germany provide excellent examples. Strong, democratic and locally accountable regional bodies are the source and the essence of their success. Will the Government think again about democratic accountability for the RDA?

We need two sorts of infrastructure for success in the north-west. We need what I call software infrastructure, including democracy and devolution on the one hand and enhanced training and education on the other. Investment on a grand scale in the hardware infrastructure is important, but so is investment in the software infrastructure. In other European countries, democracy and devolution enhance the value of spending and investment in the public and private sectors. Training and education are also important and the north-west has an enviable reputation for the development of engineering skills. Indeed, Hazel Grove is the birthplace of Fred Williams, the co-inventor of the first functioning computer in the world, which was developed 50 years ago at Manchester university. Despite our innovative engineering skills, Microsoft and Sanyo are not based in this country, let alone in the north-west. We are not good at exploiting our assets.

We also need investment in hardware infrastructure. I support what other hon. Members have said about investment in the west coast main line, but I go further and ask the Minister for a quick decision on the application to start the Eurostar service from Manchester. The trains are sitting in the sidings and the company is ready to operate, but the Government decision remains long awaited. We also need confirmation that the channel tunnel rail link connection will be made on time, because rail freight and rail passenger services from the north-west to Europe will be crucial in the next decade. We also need local public transport infrastructure decisions.

At the conclusion of a previous Adjournment debate, the Minister boasted about the publication of a transport White Paper, but we need transport action. In Stockport and, especially, in Hazel Grove, the issue of access to Manchester airport will become crucial with the opening of the second runway. Passenger numbers will increase from 16 million a year to 30 million, but the infrastructure to cope with that increase is not in place.

The north-west offers a high quality of life to those who live there. It offers a high quality of environment to many, but not all, who live there. It also offers a good quality of economic activity to most of us who live there. For the future, we need to ensure that those benefits are extended to all. That will need this House, the regional development agency and the local authorities and councils to work together.

11.47 am

Mrs. Louise Ellman (Liverpool, Riverside): Over the past seven years, the public, private and voluntary sectors in the north-west have developed strategies on economic development, transport, training, innovation and the environment, working through the North-West Partnership and the North-West Regional Association. Now that the Government have appointed the regional development agency with executive authority to act, supported by the North-West regional chamber, we can move from developing those strategies piecemeal to a more focused effort to bring investment to the north-west. That will help to change the situation in which the north-west has one of

the lowest gross domestic products per head in the country and contains many urban deprived areas, including Liverpool, which ranks first for urban deprivation in England and Wales.

I wish to draw attention to a major opportunity that has arisen to develop trade in the port of Liverpool, the area that I represent, and the whole of the north-west. The Good Friday Irish peace agreement has opened up new opportunities to develop the growing trade between the Irish Republic, Northern Ireland and the north-west through the expanding port of Liverpool. It is part of an initiative to develop east-west trade, linking both parts of Ireland with the north-west and developing a corridor creating a gateway to northern and central Europe.

The development of a regional development agency, speaking for the north-west and with authority to act—working together with the north-south ministerial council to be set up in Ireland, the British-Irish Council and the Northern Ireland Assembly—means that we are now in a unique position to develop that expanding trade.

I was pleased to chair and help develop an important new trade group between the north-west and Ireland which met in the House of Commons three weeks ago. My hon. Friend the Member for Bootle (Mr. Benton) and I held a meeting with the Irish Businesses and Employers Confederation, the Northern Ireland Confederation of British Industry, the Bank of England, the North-West chamber of commerce, the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, the Warrington Project and other industrial and commercial groupings, together with the chairman designate of the RDA.

That group was set up to develop trade between Ireland, the north-west and northern Europe. It recognises the growth in trade between both parts of Ireland and the north-west, and the fact that 30 per cent. of goods from Ireland come to the United Kingdom. It also recognises that, in 1997, 2.5 million tonnes of freight passed between Liverpool and Ireland. That is part of the development of Liverpool and the expansion of trade and the generation of wealth there.

To develop that trade link between Ireland, the north-west and northern Europe we must look for opportunities to develop exports. We need to identify new markets by researching different sectors, to identify and remove barriers to trade and to consider policies for backing small and medium enterprises, both as part of this initiative and more generally.

We must consider investment in SMEs, the need for new technology and communications, investment in the west coast main line and in the Liverpool-to-Hull rail line, and the development of the port of Liverpool. We should also consider co-operation between education institutions.

Mr. Brady: Does the hon. Lady wish to pay tribute to the vital role of the abolition of the dock labour scheme in the development of the port of Liverpool, without which it could not have gone on to expand its trade in the way that she has described?

Mrs. Ellman: I am pleased to see increased investment in the port of Liverpool and the hard work being done there by all parties. I welcome that expansion. This initiative is an important part of developing trade and wealth in Liverpool while developing trade opportunities for businesses throughout the north-west.

The sectors already identified for the expansion of trade generate wealth and jobs and include the food and tourism sectors. In the north-west, tourism generates £1.5 billion and 200,000 jobs—6 per cent. of the north-west's work force. In Merseyside, 16,500 jobs are generated by tourism and £500 million is spent through tourism in that economy. This is a major opportunity for the expansion of tourism, as for other sectors of industry where research is required.

Mr. Jack: Does the hon. Lady agree that her last few remarks are a tribute to the work undertaken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) when he took such a special interest in Merseyside and its problems?

Mrs. Ellman: The right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) made many promises, but delivered little. It is the hard work of the people of Liverpool and Merseyside, together with the investment that has been attracted, that is starting to turn the area round. We must not forget that Merseyside still has the lowest GDP per head in the whole of the United Kingdom, which signifies that we have a long way to go, despite new investment, major efforts and increasing prosperity.

The setting up of the north-west and Ireland trade group presents an excellent chance to focus on new opportunities. The North-West regional development agency provides an executive body which can support SMEs, trade and communications, and lobby for and attract further investment and training in the region.

I hope that all sectors will support this new initiative. I hope that the Minister, through his Department and in discussion with other Departments, will support it. It is about investment, communications and the generation of wealth and much-needed employment.

11.55 am

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in this important debate and I, too, congratulate the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on securing it.

Listening to the contributions of Labour Members, I was disappointed that, so far, there has been no reference to the importance of education in regenerating the north-west. That is a special interest of mine on which I would like to spend a little time this morning.

The north-west has some fine schools, both state and independent. Manchester, in particular, has excellent independent schools—Manchester grammar, Manchester high and Withington girls' school, among others. But the tragedy is that in many parts of the north-west, the state education sector fails to live up to the standards which the people there have a right to expect.

Mr. Miller: Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that Cheshire has delivered a higher standard of education than Kent, despite Kent being full of grammar schools? Perhaps he could explain why that is so.

Mr. Brady: You would doubtless rightly call me to account for departing as far as Kent, Mr. Deputy Speaker. However, I am happy to take the hon. Gentleman a little closer to home to my own borough of Trafford, where schools perform rather better than those in Cheshire, and

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rather better than in any other part of the north-west. Last year, we had the best A-level results in the country and our secondary modern schools—not just our grammar schools—are achieving outstanding results. The hon. Gentleman may wish to consider the Ashton-on-Mersey school in my constituency, which the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has declared a beacon school—an example of how to educate our children in the north-west; a secondary modern school which is performing better than most comprehensive schools.

The hon. Gentleman may also care to consider the Jeff Joseph college in Sale, a city technology college, which is now recognised as being the most improved state school in the country over the past year, again, in a selective system, not a grammar school but a secondary school achieving fantastic results.

Labour Members would be wise to reflect, not on the ideology, but on what it is that achieves the highest standards in education in the north west. The hon. Member for Wirral, South (Mr. Chapman) has grammar schools and the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale, East (Mr. Goggins) is privileged to have Sale grammar school in his constituency. Many of us represent excellent schools which should be defended and protected. In the interests of our children in the north-west, we should be looking to spread that example, not only by maintaining the excellent schools that we already have in some parts of the north-west, but by trying to learn something from them.

One of the great missed opportunities of the early days of the new Government in the education sphere was that they tended to focus their activities on undermining the very best schools rather than trying to build up the bad schools which are letting down our children in many parts of the north west.

I come now to the economy and industrial relations. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) was gracious in her tribute to the previous Government for the abolition of the dock labour scheme. I think that the import of her remarks in reply to my intervention was that she recognised that the port of Liverpool could not have achieved any of the growth and expansion to which she alluded had the dock labour scheme still been in place.

Mrs. Ellman: The hon. Gentleman is mistaken. He draws the wrong inference from my comments.

Mr. Brady: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for pointing that out. I am deeply sorry to hear that I have drawn the wrong inference. Perhaps I was being too charitable to her. Apparently, she has missed the fact that the port of Liverpool could not have developed in the way in which it has without the abolition of the dock labour scheme. I hope that she will talk to those who run the port and ask them their views on that. I suspect that she will find that they agree with the inference that I chose to draw from her remarks.

Liverpool has been dogged by bad industrial relations performance—more, perhaps, by the perception of bad industrial relations on Merseyside—and that has to be tackled. My hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) suggested that there is a battle between Manchester and Liverpool. I would not want that, although one thing that the regional development agency will have to address is long-standing rivalry between, not only those two great cities, but the other parts of the north-west. Cumbria, which never considered itself to be part of the north-west, has been brought into the same RDA zone, which will cause problems for the RDA.

It was slightly unfortunate that no hon. Member representing Liverpool gave true praise to my right hon. Friend the Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine).

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): He is a pro-European.

Mr. Brady: My right hon. Friend is certainly a great supporter of the city of Liverpool and of Merseyside. If the hon. Gentleman visits Merseyside as often as I do, he will know that its people retain great affection for my right hon. Friend.

Mr. Jack: They talk of little else.

Mr. Brady: Very little else; my right hon. Friend is right to point that out. The people of Merseyside feel that there has been a void in the past 18 months, and they might like someone to fill that role.

The role that has been performed so ably by the development corporation—in Liverpool, as in other parts of the country—also deserves a mention. There was a rather sad aspect to the speech by the hon. Member for Salford. I have great affection for her, as she knows, and she spoke with great enthusiasm about Salford, Manchester and the north-west, but she was wrong to suggest that the investment to which she alluded—at some length—was all achieved by the new Government and to give so little credit to the previous Government for their important role in building the economy of the north-west so effectively.

In the same vein, reference was made to why investment in the west coast main line did not happen sooner. Labour Members should reflect on the fact that the massive investment in that line—and in trains, in which Virgin Trains is taking part—would not have happened had it not been for the privatisation of the rail network. Modernisation started some time ago, but, sadly, it will take a little while to achieve the benefits. I hope that the hon. Member for Salford, and her hon. and right hon. Friends, will not take all the credit when that happens. Investment by private companies, and achieved because of the freedoms that the previous Government gave to them, will bring enormous benefits to the north-west.

The north-west is a land of enormous opportunities. My constituency perhaps has greater good fortune than some other parts of the region. We have excellent education, a nice environment in which to live and a vibrant small-industry sector. I am also privileged to represent many of the people who make businesses work across much of Manchester and much of the north-west. They perform an important role.

What concerns me about the new Government's policies, proposals and approach to business and the economy is that, sadly, the whole thrust of their economic and employment policies will make the work of the people who I represent more difficult. It will make it harder for businesses to justify investment in their operations and to make a profit, increase the costs of

employing people and discourage investment and the creation of jobs. I fear that, in the coming years, the result will be more lost jobs and less investment in the region.

12.4 pm

Mr. Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on ensuring that the debate has taken place. It is funny that the Opposition do not seem to remember the 1980s for the decline of the north-west and the complete destruction of jobs and industry. The way of life in the north-west was totally threatened by the previous Government. We must look to the new millennium and to the new Government to ensure that the fortunes of the north-west are redressed and that the balance comes back to the north from the south.

The north-west has always been the engine room of the country and of the economy. It has stimulated the country and has always responded, as it will continue to do, but we must ensure that the north-west has a strong voice. That will come through the regional development agency. Some of us believe that it should be elected; that will come, when we have seen its worth.

The north-west will have to compete against the Welsh Assembly and the Scottish Parliament. It has to stand together and be united, and there is no better place to look than Lancashire, and what it has to offer. In Chorley, we have a former Royal Ordnance site with 800 acres of brown-field land ready for redevelopment and ready to play a crucial role. What better place is there than Chorley to host the headquarters of the new RDA? It would be an ideal position, because it is central to the north-west.

We must not lose sight of that, and we must also remember that we have farming in Lancashire. Thankfully, the Government are addressing farming issues and ensuring that farmers will continue to farm in the north-west, which was the second most affected region because of bad management by the previous Government. The Government are addressing that. They will continue to do so, and they will continue to be supported.

The north-west Members of Parliament stood together against the decision to move to Wales the headquarters of 101 Battalion, the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers. We will continue to fight that, because it would mean redundancies in the north-west. That is not acceptable.

We should be pleased that we have an important role to play in ensuring that the north-west has a main line link to Europe. We must not lose sight of that and we must stand together to ensure that we get a direct link—it is crucial. We want further investment in the west coast main line. Would not it be nice to see the InterCity trains that we lost in the early 1990s going back into Blackpool regularly? We do not want one-offs, but regular journeys that start at Blackpool.

We also want further investment. That will come from my hon. Friend the Minister, who believes in the north-west. He will support it and continue to ensure that we get a fair crack of the whip, which we failed to get under the previous Government.

Health is important, and there have been new challenges with the link-up of Chorley and South Ribble district general and Royal Preston hospitals in clinical services. That will create a better response and better ability to treat people's needs. We must also remember that renal services are important. They were failed in the 18 years of the previous Government, but I believe that the Government will address that and will continue to do so quickly. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing this debate.

12.8 pm

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): I am grateful for the opportunity to take part in the brief debate. I am not sure whether Walt Disney has heard of the hon. Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle)—some of the stuff that came from him was complete fantasy. We should start concentrating on the great potential and opportunities that exist in the north-west, although there are distinct problems as well.

I refer the hon. Member for Chorley to the latest Confederation of British Industry report, which says that "considerable pessimism" still exists in the north-west. We rely a lot on manufacturing, and manufacturing jobs have declined in the past 18 months. My right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) talked about British Aerospace, which is vital as an engine for skilled defence jobs in the north-west. Hundreds of small businesses throughout the north-west feed into British Aerospace. There are skills in British Aerospace at Warton in my right hon. Friend's constituency and at Salmesbury in mine, and at Royal Ordnance in Chorley. There is a tremendous skill base, and we want it to increase.

The hon. Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman) spoke about manufacturing jobs and the need to export, but we have high interest rates compared to the rest of Europe and a strong pound because of that. It is difficult for manufacturing industry in the north-west to get those new markets about which she spoke, because it has to compete with industries in the rest of Europe. It is a great shame that she does not take such opportunities to lobby Ministers and persuade them to produce different economic policies. I do not think that anyone would dispute the fact that we are in a recession created by Downing street. The problems faced by industries in the north-west are the Government's responsibility, because of their economic policies.

The hon. Lady's answer to the problem is an elected regional chamber. Does she really believe that the people of the north-west are clamouring for yet another elected body? Where will it all end? We have elections to Westminster, European parliamentary elections, county council elections, borough elections and parish elections, but she wants yet more elections. The Labour Government understand bureaucracy and red tape, but they do not understand business.

Mr. Woolas: When we have elections in the north-west, my side wins and the hon. Gentleman's side loses. That is why we like elections.

Mr. Evans: At least all the Lancashire Conservative MPs have turned up for the debate. After the next election, when we have another debate on the north-west,

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many more Lancashire Conservative MPs will be sitting on the Government Benches, and the hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends will be sitting on the Opposition Benches.

Mr. Brady: Has it occurred to my hon. Friend that only 10 out of the 64 Labour MPs who represent the north-west are present? That is not a good performance.

Mr. Evans: I suspect that the others are busy putting advertisements in next year's *Yellow Pages*, so that they, too, can get another job.

Tourism is vital. As has been said, it is important for Manchester and Liverpool. I represent a rural constituency, 75 per cent. of which is an area of outstanding natural beauty. We want more tourism in the north-west, which could feed into Blackpool. It is a great shame that the new Labour Government's attitude to Blackpool is so snobbish. That seaside resort attracts many millions of people, and instead of slamming Blackpool, the north-west Labour MPs should have spoken up on its behalf.

I invited the Minister for the Environment to come swimming with me in the sea at Blackpool, such is my confidence. I make the same offer to the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning, who may take it up when he winds up the debate. He could come up to Blackpool and we could have a nice little dip. The hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) referred to the Titanic. I do not know whether the Minister will float or sink, but I assure him that no harm will come to him from what is in the sea at Blackpool. That is proved time and again by the many millions of people who are not as snobbish as the new Labour Government and come to Blackpool in their droves.

Millions of pounds have been spent on the pleasure beach, which attracts tourists from Britain and Europe. Granada studios are in the north-west, so that will ensure that this clip is not on "North Westminster" on Sunday. We also have Alton towers. Many tourists come to the north-west, and we want tourism in the region to develop further.

Transport infrastructure has been mentioned time and again. We want new investment to alleviate the clogs and jams on the M6. Hon. Members who travel back to their constituency by road know that there is a problem. Publicity during the Labour party conference highlighted the severe problems with the trains. One of my constituents has written to me about her experiences. She travels every week between Preston and Euston, and told me that the majority of the trains are late. We need new investment in infrastructure to ensure that the north-west will survive and, as a result of regeneration, prosper into the future.

12.14 pm

Mr. Simon Burns (West Chelmsford): I welcome the debate. I am pleased to see my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack), my hon. Friends the Members for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), for Ribble Valley (Mr. Evans) and for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Mr. Collins), and, for a time, my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton), who have listened to all or part of the debate.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) on her enthusiastic opening speech, and on her obvious pride in the city of Salford. I enjoyed listening to her as she took us on a Cook's tour of the achievements in her constituency. I do not want to enter a sour note, but I thought that she was a trifle churlish in suggesting that this new Jerusalem began in the early hours of 2 May 1997. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde aptly pointed out, many of the measures that have led to the regeneration of Salford were introduced by the previous Government, but one would not expect to get that message from the comments of Labour Members.

Between 1979 and 1997, the previous Government's policies helped to secure record inward investment, not least in the north-west. During that period, inward investment in the north-west helped to create or to safeguard more than 80,000 jobs. Conservative policies brought Sony to Merseyside. In the teeth of opposition from the Labour party, our policies enabled BNFL to flourish: it is a major contributor to the economy of the north-west. The current Government's economic policies jeopardise the progress that has been made.

The Conservative regeneration strategy helped town and country alike. The hon. Member for West Lancashire (Mr. Pickthall) referred to rural and agricultural life. The single regeneration budget combined into one pot 20 separate programmes previously operated by five different Departments, and provided a flexible fund for local regeneration. In the three years from 1995, the SRB provided some £4 billion, with more than £800 million from the challenge fund for new regeneration projects. The emphasis on competitive bidding ensured that funds were targeted on the schemes most likely to produce tangible results.

In 1994–99, the Merseyside objective 1 area has received more than £350 million in funding from the European regional development fund. Meanwhile, the Rural Development Commission and our rural challenge scheme promoted a range of programmes supporting economic and social regeneration in rural areas. We established the 230 business links across England, which provided one-stop training, advice and information centres for business. I hope that that puts the position into perspective, because these measures did not begin on 2 May 1997.

I do not have long, and I do not want to eat into the Minister's time, but I must pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Fylde. He referred to the numerous regeneration projects in the region, and brought up the important subject of British Aerospace and the aerospace industry. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Altrincham and Sale, West, who described the crucial role of education, which is a fundamental part of the regeneration of our cities, towns and rural areas. It is vital for people to have the proper education and training to be able to compete in and contribute to a highly competitive economic environment.

I am not sure how the Minister will respond to the challenge of my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley, tempting as some people may find it. My hon. Friend raised the important issue of tourism in the region. He also made a valid point, which I know Labour Members do not like hearing. Given that Labour Members have paid lip service to Blackpool, which featured prominently in the debate, why did their party kick the town in the teeth by deciding that it was not good enough

to host its conference every other year—although, presumably, it is good enough for other people to visit for their holidays? Clearly, Labour is not the servant of the people but the overclass, and the hotel and tourism facilities that Blackpool has to offer are not good enough for new Labour.

I fear that the threat posed by the Government's current economic policies—by relatively high interest rates, and the level of sterling—to manufacturing and other industry will hinder, rather than help, the further development of the north-west.

12.21 pm

The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning (Mr. Richard Caborn): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Ms Blears) for initiating the debate. She is a great champion of the north-west, and of Salford in particular. As many speakers observed today, she does justice to the region, and I have no doubt that, in the not too distant future, she will become a great agent for tourism.

The debate has featured a notable contrast between the constructive and the destructive. Hon. Members have suggested that we should adopt a constructive approach to the problems that we inherited from the last Government, implying that, during their 18 years in office, that Government did no damage to our economy. Other genuinely constructive suggestions have been made, however. My hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Riverside (Mrs. Ellman), for example, described efforts to promote trade with Ireland. I know that the chairman-elect of the regional development agency has been involved in those efforts. Others have referred to the need to ensure that the economy of the north-west is handled in the way that should be expected of a Labour Government, and to deal with the economic deficit that is the legacy of the last Government.

The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) mentioned the aerospace industry. There is no doubt that the industry is a jewel in the crown of British manufacturing, and the north-west has played its role. In the early 1990s, I chaired the Select Committee on Trade and Industry for four or five years. We produced two reports on aerospace, in which we pleaded with the Administration of the day to provide launch aid similar to that provided by our continental partners and by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration in America; but we did not get a dime out of that Administration. As the right hon. Gentleman will see from column 1036 of *Hansard*, he was told in a parliamentary answer on 3 December that the Government were investing up to £323 million in launch aid for the British aerospace industry.

Mr. Jack: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Caborn: No.

That is in marked contrast to what was done by the last Administration. The same applies to economic regeneration. The last Administration dealt only with the symptoms, not with the cause. A classic example is provided by an interview with the right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) about development corporations in the *Financial Times*. When the right hon. Gentleman, then President of the Board of Trade, was asked how he would control the corporations, he replied, "It is very easy. For as long as I have a pot of gold on my desk, they will beat a path to my door." That is an example of the arrogance of centralised government—the wish not to devolve power to people so that they can find real, sustainable solutions to their problems, but to ensure that everything is dictated from the centre.

Throughout their 18 years in government, the Conservatives took powers from local authorities and partnerships, and domiciled them in Whitehall. This Government are dealing not just with the symptoms, but with the underlying problems that we have inherited. We are bringing together regional development agencies—which will be business led—and other partners, in the hope that they can deal with the fact that not one English region is now performing, in terms of gross domestic product per capita, as well as the European regions are on average. When it comes to wealth creation, that is the legacy of the last Administration.

We intend to tackle the problem. We shall do so by devolving real powers and resources to the regions, so that they can take a strategic overview of local problems—in this context, the problems of the north-west. The initiative has got off to a flying start with the appointment of Lord Thomas as chairman of the regional development agency in the north-west, and the appointment of a chief executive. We shall announce the membership of the boards in the next few days. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Mr. Stunell) suggested that we had said we would do so in October, but we did not have an Act of Parliament until November.

We want the partnership that we are establishing not just to address the economic deficit in the regions, but to develop further strategies with the regional chambers. Most of that will happen in the public sector, but we hope to build on partnerships in every region, particularly the north-west. The north-west has blazed a trail in establishing a partnership between the regional development agency and the regional chamber. At its inaugural meeting on 3 July, the chamber announced the constitution that would govern the partnership, which I understand has been signed by all those involved.

The regional chambers will play a role in strategic thinking that has not existed in the past, in regard to land use planning, spatial planning and the transport planning that was outlined in the White Paper announced some weeks ago by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. They will try to deal with, for instance, the problems of the west coast main line and the conurbations surrounding Birmingham, which will have a major impact on the ability of the north-west to transport, and import, goods and people. Such problems will be dealt with in a much more strategic way.

I assure Opposition Members that the proposals have been welcomed by all the stakeholders in the north-west. They may deride the role of the CBI, the chambers of commerce, regional branches of the TUC, local authorities and the community; but such derision explains why we have so many more Members of Parliament than the Opposition. We have listened to all those people.

My hon. Friend the Member for Salford mentioned the regeneration initiatives that have been used so effectively in Salford, which will no doubt continue to bring about sustainable development. This Government take seriously the need to provide resources and develop policies in a more holistic way to tackle regeneration problems in

[Mr. Caborn]

the regions. Our new deal for communities commits £800 million over the next three years to dealing with some of the worst problems in 17 English estates. I acknowledge that, as has been pointed out, it was an advance on the part of the last Government to combine the spending power of four Departments, and make it effective in terms of delivery.

We have committed some £3.8 billion to regeneration, the bulk of which will be provided through the single regeneration budget. Eighty per cent. will be targeted on urban areas, and 20 per cent. on, in particular, rural areas. As some of my hon. Friends pointed out, two-thirds of the north-west is rural.

We will co-ordinate most of those policies in the middle of next year, when we publish our urban White Paper—the first for 20-odd years—and the rural White Paper, which will clarify the links between urban and rural areas. We believe that we are tackling the real, underlying problems of the north-west by launching partnerships. Again, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Salford for instigating today's debate.

Housing Policy

12.29 pm

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): I am glad to have an opportunity to raise a matter that causes much concern throughout the country. It is a pleasure to see the Minister for London and Construction in his place. I hope that he will be as helpful as he normally is when answering in debates.

The public just do not believe that 4.4 million new houses need to be built between 1991 and 2016. They distrust the science of prediction. The Office for National Statistics says that it makes sensible predictions based on the facts that are available to it. The problem is that its estimates become a self-fulfilling prophesy. It is wrong to take the 4.4 million figure and assume that everyone will want to live in the same place as before or, indeed, that all those people should live in the same place as before.

More than 90,000 units were handed down to Devon by the region. Devon cannot trade with, for example, Cornwall, which has to build only 48,000 houses. Even if the statisticians predict correctly nationally, the Government parcel out the regional allocations using calculations that have been set by historical precedent. The figures are based on past demographic and housing trends. The inability of the regions to trade outside or within themselves means that the historical housing numbers continue unchallenged.

On the basis that we cannot change the figures—they are set in concrete—the task is to accommodate those new housing units throughout the nation without destroying the countryside any further.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I appreciate the hon. Gentleman giving me the chance to make a short intervention. Does he agree that there is a need to look at alternative methodologies, in particular ones that take account of the regional dimension, which can completely change the way in which the figures are calculated?

Mr. Steen: That is a helpful intervention. I thank the hon. Gentleman for the courtesy of letting me know that he wanted to intervene. The whole science is questionable. The statisticians have been getting away with a historical perspective that has allowed them to predict and provide year after year, without challenging the science.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): I have much sympathy with what the hon. Gentleman says. Does he agree that another flaw in that bogus science is the fact that huge allowance is made for, say, divorcing couples, but no allowance is made for the fact that divorced couples team up with other people thereafter?

Mr. Steen: This is a debate about housing, but the hon. Gentleman is right. Divorce is part of the problem with the housing allocation figures, because the statisticians presume that people are going to go on divorcing at the present rate and living with partners at the present rate. The statisticians go on predicting and providing down that ugly path, which is usually incorrect.

Why do housing projections continue to follow the predict-and-provide model when the Government say that they are ignoring it and another type of planning, which is used for road planning, abandoned the model a long

time ago? We have found out that, if we predict traffic levels and build the roads to accommodate them, traffic volume increases above and beyond the projected levels; the M25 is a classic example.

Why should we build more roads if the effect is simply to increase traffic and gridlock? Infinite car usage is not financially, environmentally or socially sustainable; building 90,000 new houses in Devon is not sustainable either. Why on earth do housing planners and statisticians not realise that? No one can stop the planning juggernaut, except the Minister. He alone has access to the brake pedal.

If we build 4.4 million units of housing, they will be occupied sooner or later. What about the effect on the housing market of all that building? Will it not erode the value of existing properties, again creating negative equity for some householders?

The statisticians believe that many of those additional housing units will be used to accommodate the fall-out from family break-ups, which the hon. Member for Torridge and West Devon (Mr. Burnett) mentioned. Divorce accounts for about a third of the 4.4 million units of new housing required. Again, we are told that 30 per cent. of those new housing units are intended for occupation by an increasing number of single people and by elderly people who are living longer. In addition, there is the movement of people taking or seeking work in another region.

There is also another reason. Statistics from South Hams, which is part of my constituency, show a massive in-migration from outside the county. Between 1981 and 1997, the population of South Hams increased by 15 per cent. By contrast, that of the whole county of Devon increased by only 5 per cent. Therefore, the population increase in South Hams has been out of all proportion to the increase in the county as a whole.

In the three months ending March 1998, 8,233 additional people moved into Devon, and about that number have moved in nearly every quarter since 1988. There is massive in-migration to Devon of 35,000 people a year. Current policy makes provision for all those people and is based on a liberalism and permissiveness that make some feel obliged to respond automatically to all social demands, regardless of the devastation that it wreaks on existing communities.

Having predicted, should we provide? South Hams has among the highest number of designated beauty and conservation areas of anywhere in England and Wales. On being told that it must build 12,000 new units by 2016, South Hams will have to build the equivalent of three or four new towns, all on green-field sites. Even Dartmoor national park, which is also partly in my constituency, has to find room for 800 more houses.

We are faced with the fact that the number of units that are planned for the principal conurbations in Devon—Plymouth and Torbay—is just a fraction more than the number for the countryside of South Hams. Torbay is having 6,300 new houses built, Plymouth 7,000. Between them, Exeter and Plymouth are to build the same number of houses as those planned for the South Hams countryside. If we build houses in one of the most beautiful areas of the United Kingdom, there will always be a queue of people to live in them—until the buildings destroy the beauty of the area.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Does my hon. Friend accept that it is the same in the north-west, in my constituency? The ridiculous predictive figures mean that Whittingham will have to provide for an extra 1,000 houses, when only 500 houses exist in the village, and Calderstones and Grimsargh several hundred extra houses. Those small villages will be dwarfed by the new developments.

Mr. Steen: My hon. Friend puts it in his normal lucid and imaginative way. Villages will be swamped and destroyed. That is what the Government have to face.

It is town versus countryside. Even if it is too late to stop the 90,000 units being built in Devon, it is not too late to ensure that housing units are contained within existing urban areas. Cheap and pleasant housing should be made available in our principal cities: Plymouth, Exeter and Torbay. We should rebuild the inner cities to include single-person flats. Young people living in them will help to rejuvenate our city centres.

Mrs. Linda Gilroy (Plymouth, Sutton): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is important that, to make our cities attractive, they should be able to keep open spaces for use as parks, and so on? May I take the opportunity to assure him that Plymouth has been doing everything to look at where it can build houses or find new houses? Is he also aware of the structure plan working party of elected Members from our areas, which has looked at the figures? Far from their being handed top down, as the hon. Gentleman has suggested, the working party has agreed that, with some modest adjustments, it will be able and will have to provide for the number of houses that are planned. It is a case of plan and manage, rather than predict and provide.

Mr. Steen: It is all very well the hon. Lady saying that Plymouth can absorb all the extra houses. Of course it can, because the figures for Plymouth and Torbay together are only slightly more than the number for the countryside of South Hams. Plymouth does not have a large number.

Mrs. Gilroy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Steen: I will not give way any more.

Mrs. Gilroy *rose—*

Mr. Steen: I will not give way to the hon. Lady. Plymouth does not have a large number of houses. The houses that are going to damage Devon are the houses that have been allocated to the district councils; they will destroy the countryside. I apologise, but I must get on.

Mrs. Gilroy: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Steen: I am not giving way again.

Mrs. Gilroy: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): I do not think that the hon. Lady really has a point of order. She has made a little speech and I think that she has done very well.

Mrs. Gilroy: Indeed, but the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) said that I had said something that I did not say—that Plymouth could cope with providing the houses. It will have great difficulty in doing so.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is no right of reply. It has to be remembered that this is an Adjournment debate,

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

where a Back Bencher brings a case to the House to allow a Minister to reply. There may be another occasion when the hon. Lady can put the record straight.

Mr. Steen: I hope that I will be given an extra minute, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The intervention by the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton (Mrs. Gilroy) took a minute and delayed the progress of an excellent and important speech.

City centres have been emptying into and on to the suburbs since the 1960s, with green-field sites taking the strain. Nottingham and Liverpool illustrate that trend. Inner-city schools are closing down because of lack of demand, while rural and suburban schools try to cope with increasingly unwieldy class sizes. Many built-on sites are under-utilised. The approach roads to Plymouth are lined with one-storey shops—something should be done there.

In Devon, why not concentrate on building the 90,000 new units in the cities? Enough land is left to accommodate those units, whether it be unused, underused, vacant, dormant or derelict. It is all there, but no one will take the lead. Of course, it is easier and cheaper for developers to build on green-field sites, but we must not let builders concrete over green-field land simply because it is cheaper for them to do so than to rehabilitate brown-field urban land. We need to increase the tax on green-field building and give tax incentives for brown-field site development. The present projections are that nearly 1.5 per cent. of England's total land area will be swallowed up by urbanisation by 2016. That means 2,750 acres of the countryside being built on each year.

As for infrastructure, the 90,000 new housing units in Devon will place strains on the sewerage system, water supply, schools, hospitals and so forth. Even where houses are not being built, the ripple effect will impact throughout the county. There will be more cars, schoolchildren and recreational requirements. More general practitioners will be needed, more water will be consumed and more sewage treatment will be needed.

Even the airwaves are already full—so much so that south Devon cannot receive Channel 5, although that may be a blessing in disguise. We simply do not have the environmental capacity to accommodate in Devon everyone who may like to live there. The effect on the environment and the damage to well-established and happy communities would simply be too great.

Predict and provide is a top-down approach and does untold damage. The Government must reverse that policy, which is based on the premise that what has gone before is the yardstick for what should happen. The Government must review the way in which their central housing figures are distributed among the regions. The districts, counties and regions must be prepared to object to the housing figures that are handed down to them when they have the opportunity to do so. It is no good doing what the Liberals did in Devon last July. They voted for 90,000 new units and the very same evening launched a campaign claiming that, if the houses for which they had voted that afternoon were built, untold damage would result and much of the countryside would be suburbanised. That was the action of not merely Liberals at the county level but the Torbay Liberals, the South Hams district council Liberals and the North Devon Liberals, who all voted for the housing figures that they were given, which they admit would destroy the countryside. They vote and then they weep crocodile tears. I see the hon. Member for Torbay (Mr. Sanders) rising and I will give way to him if he will make his intervention short.

Mr. Adrian Sanders (Torbay): I will make it as short as possible, but I do not understand how Liberals in Torbay, a unitary authority, could have voted on those figures for the county. The figures that they chose were below those that the Secretary of State said he had rejected. He is imposing a higher figure and so the hon. Gentleman should address his remarks to the Secretary of State, not to councillors. Also, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) introduced predict and provide when he was Secretary of State in a Conservative Government.

Mr. Steen: I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman will join me in campaigning against the Secretary of State, as the figures are disastrous for Devon.

The Government should review all county structure plan figures. They should create tax incentives for brown-field building and tax green-field developments. Our priority must be to rebuild the cities and save the countryside. As it is, many of our cities resemble doughnuts with no jam left in the middle. Regions should be able to trade housing numbers with other regions and, within them, counties should be able to do the same.

The Government may predict, but they must not automatically provide. If they do, they should allocate housing units to the less populated areas and should not allow the south-east and the south-west to bear the brunt of the housing explosion. The Government must heed a warning from all parts of the country that the countryside is in peril. There is widespread discontent about the housing figures and their allocation. The Government must listen—as the Conservative party is listening—because the people have spoken.

12.44 pm

Mr. Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) on raising this subject and I am grateful to him for asking me to take one minute of his time to endorse what he has said. I do not think that he has left me a full minute, so I will be as quick as I can.

First, I agree with everything that he said about predict and provide. I also agree with most of his conclusions, apart from having some reservations about his passing reference to tax. I rely on my hon. Friend's judgments on matters that affect Devon and will not debate them with Liberal Members, although they endorsed what he said about the methodology of predict and provide, and I think that we all agree about that.

Similar consequences have occurred in Nottinghamshire. One can substitute different place names in the analysis, but similar problems arise. I hope that, in his reply, the Minister will show that flexibility for which he is sometimes known and will say that the policy will change.

My district of Rushcliffe is having 14,400 new dwellings imposed on it by a county structure plan that predates the general election. Nothing has changed since then, except that all the road building has been cancelled and the new Government policy is that 65 per cent. of

new homes should, where possible, be built on brown-field sites, although our area has only a minuscule number of those. I hope that the Minister will endorse my hon. Friend's suggestion that districts should be allowed to revisit the figures.

The city of Nottingham wants more dwellings than it has been allocated; Rushcliffe wants fewer dwellings. Several of the districts could come to an agreement. The Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning has already said that he may be flexible if the county council is flexible. I hope that we will have a helpful response from the Minister.

12.47 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) for allowing me a minute. As a colleague from Devon, I congratulate him because, as he knows, I have fought for more than 20 years to stop the spread of the concrete jungle into the countryside, in particular in Devon.

The projected figures for Devon would mean an increase of more than 30 per cent. in its population. Does the Minister believe that we can do that without ruining much of the environment of the area? My constituency is a prime example. When I fought the 1967 general election, the electorate was 63,000. Since then, the size of my constituency has been cut three times, but if I had now the same parishes that I had then, the electorate would be 122,000. That is the sort of increase that we have already had to put up with. The projected increase would have a terrifying effect on the environment and the countryside—it is not possible. I absolutely support what my hon. Friend has said and I am delighted that he has been able to instigate this debate. The Government must listen. They must revise the figures that they are making the countryside bear.

12.48 pm

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) for raising those issues. A number of other hon. Members have also expressed concerns about household growth. The hon. Gentleman also raised this matter in the recent debate on the report on planning for housing by the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs. He knows from that debate that the Select Committee has carefully considered the validity of the household projections not merely once, but twice. It looked into projections methodology in 1995 and again this year. I cannot do better than to quote the hon. Gentleman's hon. Friend, the Member for North Wiltshire (Mr. Gray), who is a member of that Committee. He said:

"On the number of houses that we will require between now and 2016, I do not agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen), who went to great lengths to rubbish . . . the figures. In Committee, I went to some length to try to find holes in the figures produced by my former colleagues, the excellent civil servants in the Department of the Environment, but no amount of effort on my part could produce an argument to show that 4.4 million was necessarily wrong."—[*Official Report*, 22 October 1998; Vol. 317, c. 1426.]

The hon. Member for North Wiltshire served on the Select Committee and looked at the figures critically and carefully. Given the implication of the figures, his view is not surprising—4.4 million sounds a horrendously large figure, but as an annual rate of housing provision it works out at about 175,000 homes a year, which is about half the housing that was provided in the 1960s and is below the trend for the post-war period. It is a relatively low level of new housing provision compared with what occurred previously. That is why it is important to put it in perspective, as the Select Committee has done.

Mr. Burnett: On the methodology point, the demographic pattern is falling as is the number of people living in Britain. There are also other phenomena to which I referred in my intervention on the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen). For example, divorcing couples do not necessarily produce two households. In addition, the area does not have the infrastructure to cope with vastly increased numbers.

Mr. Raynsford: I am rather sorry that I gave way to the hon. Gentleman, as it is clear that he has not looked carefully at the methodology. The demographics are not falling, the population is not falling and a trend of household increase has persisted throughout most of the post-war period. If the hon. Gentleman had done his homework, he would know that most previous housing forecasts have underestimated, not overestimated, the extent of household formation. Hon. Members who have examined the issue carefully—as the Select Committee has done—have reached that conclusion, although some of them did not want to do so. I urge the hon. Gentleman and others who are suspicious of the figures to do their homework; they will then know why so many people have reached that conclusion.

Mr. Steen: Let us accept the figures. Will the Minister now address how we should deal with them?

Mr. Raynsford: That is exactly what I intend to do.

The household numbers are not something that the Government simply dream up. They were not even produced by the present Government, but were produced by the previous Administration. We would have no reason to support them if we did not consider them to be soundly based. We have no reason to change them, and nor does the Select Committee.

People continue to form households almost regardless of the prevailing economic situation and we ignore trends at our peril. We are not talking about speculation. All the people who are considered in need of housing by 2016 have already been born. Are we to deny them decent housing?

The hon. Gentleman referred to migration. I accept entirely that it is a difficult issue for Devon, but as we do not live in a Maoist society that can ban migration, it cannot be ignored. The hon. Gentleman himself migrated to Devon some years ago when he decided that South Hams was more congenial than Liverpool, Wavertree, his previous constituency. Responsible government means that we have to manage population movements as best we can.

Mr. Sanders: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Raynsford: No. I have already given way more than enough and I am running out of time.

Pulling up the drawbridge or pretending that the problem does not exist is not responsible government. Providing fewer homes would create difficulties. It could

[Mr. Raynsford]

worsen housing conditions such as overcrowding, increase homelessness and contribute to house-price inflation. It could also work against the interests of local people with modest incomes, as incomers with large disposable incomes would probably bid up house prices and squeeze out local people. We have to address the issue.

For that reason, we have proposed moving away from the traditional approach of predict and provide, which we did not regard as a satisfactory basis, towards a more bottom-up approach with local authorities playing a key role through regional planning conferences on the principle of plan, manage and monitor rather than predict and provide.

The fundamental point is that the new approach is being developed through the new round of regional planning guidance which will provide the first opportunity to take account of the household projections published in 1995. The draft guidance will set new figures for the region, as well as for the counties and unitary authorities. The figures will also be tested in a public examination, exposing them to considerable public scrutiny, which is obviously sensible. Each region will develop a comprehensive monitoring arrangement to scrutinise the effects of the eventual level of housing which is agreed. Each region of England is currently engaged in the process and in the south-west the regional conference of local authorities is already well advanced with its draft. We need to work together in ensuring that the new approach is developed in as constructive a context as possible, and I hope that the hon. Gentleman will join us in developing the new approach.

I now turn to the hon. Gentleman's points about the Devon structure plan and the proposed new settlements adjoining Exeter and Plymouth. As I have mentioned already, household growth is a fact and it is for the local authorities in each area to produce the best solutions they can to manage the growth in the most sustainable way. The structure plan with which the hon. Gentleman is concerned is based on existing regional planning guidance containing housing figures agreed by the authorities in the region back in 1994. That is the guidance to which the structure plan must therefore have regard.

As the hon. Gentleman will no doubt know, the Government have made their concerns clear about the Devon structure plan and it is now for the authorities to decide what action to take in the light of those concerns. The Government wish authorities to be realistic and responsible in allocating land for housing. The main aim of our new approach is to ensure that as much new housing as possible is located on previously developed land. That is why we increased the national target to 60 per cent., although what can be achieved will vary from region to region. In the south-west, only a third of all land used for housing was previously developed. Although I acknowledge that there are particular difficulties in parts of the south-west, nevertheless we will expect a more ambitious target in the new regional planning guidance from the south-west region.

If authorities suggest quite radical approaches such as new settlements, the Government expect the proposals to be sustainable. We have as much interest as anyone in maintaining and enhancing the countryside—especially in beautiful parts of the country such as Devon. We have stressed that the need for any new settlements must be thoroughly justified.

The way forward lies in building on the consensus that lies at the heart of the debate. There is far more common ground than there are differences of views. Everyone wants as much land recycling as possible. Everyone wants more sustainable patterns of development. Everyone wants to protect the countryside and regenerate our urban areas, and I think that everyone wants to ensure that people are adequately housed and not left homeless or in bad housing conditions.

Mr. Steen: I do not mind too much what the Minister is saying, but he has said nothing about how we can stop 12,000 new housing units being built. According to the Library, South Hams is one of the most beautiful constituencies in England and Wales. How does he propose to stop 12,000 houses being built there when the same number is expected to be built in Plymouth and Torbay? How can he switch it so that the countryside is not ruined by too many houses?

Mr. Raynsford: As I have said already, we have made observations in our response to the Devon structure plan and it is now for the county to reach its conclusions before submitting proposals to us. I hope that the hon. Gentleman recognises that in the circumstances I cannot make any further comment. However, I have stressed the importance of maximising the amount of development on previously developed land.

The Government are trying to develop that agenda—which I believe is shared—as fast as possible. We made it clear in "Planning for the Communities of the Future" that our first choice for new development is that it should be on previously developed land, preferably within urban areas. We believe that a sequential approach is long overdue and we want authorities fully to explore that option before they propose urban extensions or the release of other green-field sites. The Select Committee supported our national land recycling target of 60 per cent. There is much work to be done to help authorities develop the agenda. We have set up the urban task force, under the guidance of Lord Rogers, to examine the practical issues involved in making better use of brown-field sites.

Work is progressing on the national land use database—the equivalent of a Domesday book for the 21st century—to identify previously developed sites that are available for new housing and we will soon have a much clearer picture of the opportunities to take forward that higher target for recycling.

We have a full programme of revising the relevant planning policy guidance notes. We are currently updating the guidance on planning for housing—PPG3—which will be published for consultation early in the new year. We are also preparing an urban White Paper, which will be published next year. It will set out the most comprehensive and far-sighted programme for urban renewal since our last White Paper in the 1970s.

Supermarkets (Prices)

1 pm

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I am delighted to have been given a slot on a Wednesday morning, although I am a little concerned that the original title of the debate—competitiveness in the retail sector—was vague. I have had journalists and lobbyists ringing me up and asking me what the debate was about, and I think that the Minister was a little confused initially about what my concern was.

Apparently the confusion was caused by a problem of the House. I put in for a debate on the growing power of the supermarkets and the threat that that poses to the consumer. Unfortunately, the Table Office said that the rules of the House would not allow that. Perhaps the Modernisation Committee could look into that at some time in the future.

Overcharging by British supermarkets is nothing new. As far back as 1991, when I was a member of the Agriculture Select Committee, I was part of a high-profile campaign to reduce the price of food in British supermarkets. The campaign was led by *The Sunday Times*, and both sides of the Chamber were involved in the debate. We had some success: soon after our campaign began, a price war broke out. But then, as these things happen, peace was soon declared.

Seven years ago, we had the highest prices for food in western Europe. Today, we have the highest prices for food in western Europe. So nothing has changed. In reality, things have got worse. The supermarkets try to bamboozle people by introducing gimmicks such as loyalty cards. They charge customers inflated prices, then give them back a pittance in tokens that have to be spent in the supermarket. As a spin-off from loyalty cards, the supermarkets obtain great knowledge of the buying pattern of customers, and people get junk mail through their doors as a result.

I was pleased that, on 30 July this year, the Office of Fair Trading announced that it would look into food prices. I am sure that they will endorse my claim that supermarket companies are not playing fair with the consumer or the supplier. I was led to believe that the report would be out by the end of this year, but I understand that, as a result of public pressure about a detailed report, it is not likely to be available then. Perhaps the Minister can clarify when we are likely to receive the report.

May we now examine the situation in which we find ourselves, especially here in England? There are 3,200 supermarkets. One in three are called superstores, which are premises of more than 25,000 sq ft of selling space. Four companies dominate the market. They have 60 per cent. of the market and 83 per cent. of the superstores. The companies are Tesco, Sainsbury, Asda and Safeway. The development of supermarkets in the 1960s and 1970s killed off the smaller shops, and in the 1980s and 1990s the supermarkets are giving way to the superstores, many of them in out-of-town locations.

The concentration of power in a small number of retailers has given rise to exploitation in various ways. They have a dominance in the market which enables the retailers to negotiate large discounts from the food manufacturers and suppliers. No food company in Britain can afford not to do business with the big chains. As the British farmers know to their cost, the discounts are often not passed on to the customer.

The supermarkets use special offers, whereby they sell products at a very cheap price. By the time the customers have been round the supermarket, they have paid for the cheap price two and three times over. Superstores tend to be on their own site. There is no competition on that site, so people buy the product in that superstore or not at all.

Supermarkets have now developed their own-label brands, which many people think is fair enough. However, they are not all a plus factor. They mean that the retailers have a conflict of interest. They are agents for a manufacturer, yet they are competitors to the manufacturer as well. That has led in many areas to fairly well-known secondary brands not finding a place on the supermarket shelves and disappearing altogether, thereby reducing customer choice. To quote a publication from the British Brands Group:

"the strength of private label has altered the trading relationship between the manufacturer and the retailer—the trading relationship is no longer equal—the retailers possessing a significant competitive edge".

The British Brands Group is made up of many very successful, very large companies, including Unilever, Procter and Gamble, Mars, Nestlé and Kellogg. If they are saying that the retailers have an edge over them, the customer has a real problem.

There is also the problem of look-alikes. This is where own-label products masquerade as a product very similar to a well-known brand. The customer may take it by mistake or believe that it is produced by the same manufacturer and therefore that it is good but a few pence cheaper. In reality, few look-alikes are produced by the manufacturer of the branded goods. Again, customers are being misled. In the long term, customer choice will be reduced. Companies will not invest in new products if they believe that their ideas will be copied and they will not receive the payback.

There is limited competition between the supermarkets. There is undisputed evidence that, while the big four have seen off the smaller competitor, they will not engage in true price competition among themselves. In a recent survey by *The Grocer* magazine of 33 articles, half were identically priced in all the shops. The rest differed by only a few pence.

Dan Norris (Wansdyke): Will my hon. Friend explain why he believes that there is no competition between the big four companies? Is it profiteering? It is greed? What is the motive?

Mr. Martlew: My hon. Friend will have to listen to the rest of my speech for the answer.

The price of a popular brand, Heinz tomato ketchup, was identical in Asda, Tesco, Sainsbury's and Safeway. There is no competition whatever.

Not only is there little competition among the British supermarkets, but the consumer is paying over the odds in comparison with Europe. A recent survey by *The Sunday Times* compared Tesco prices to those in Europe. The figures do not make happy reading. There were 22 items in the shopping basket. In the United Kingdom, the cost was £81.59. In Holland it was £49.55, in Belgium it was £50.67, and in Italy it was £60.20. The survey showed that the prices of many popular foodstuffs were at least 40 per cent. higher in the United Kingdom

[Mr. Martlew]

than in America or on the continent. Even when Tesco did its own survey, the prices were still higher than in the majority of European countries.

It is interesting to note that, while prices to farmers and food manufacturers have fallen in the past 12 months, the price of food in British shops has risen by 1.6 per cent. So food costs are higher in the United Kingdom, and supermarket profits are higher. Supermarket profits are about 6 per cent. in the United Kingdom, about 2.6 per cent. in France, and about 2 per cent. in America. So profits in the United States are a third of those in the United Kingdom. Charging higher prices to consumers and paying lower prices to the supplier means that there is only one winner. The statistics prove that both consumer and supplier are being systematically exploited.

The crisis in British farming is well documented, but I want to draw the House's attention to one or two points. Andrew Dare of Milk Marque told me yesterday that, four years ago, 68 per cent. of the price of a pinta went to the farmer; now, that percentage is down to 56 per cent. The problems are similar in respect of pig meat: prices paid to farmers have plummeted, yet supermarket prices have hardly decreased. The prices paid to sheep farmers are at their lowest for 20 years, but supermarket shoppers would hardly notice the difference.

The supermarkets are not passing on cost reductions to the consumer, and the price differential between consumer and supplier is huge. I accept that there are middle-man costs—for example, transport, abattoir and butchering costs—which must be paid, but the chief suspects for capitalising on and exploiting the situation must be the supermarkets. I was pleased when the Office of Fair Trading decided to investigate the excessive profits of the big four, but already a report commissioned by the OFT has highlighted the fact that the big four are using their dominance to extract discounts from suppliers that are used to swell their coffers, instead of being passed on to the consumer in the form of savings.

The case I have made today means that the Government must take action. The supermarkets' immense economic power is a growing threat to the consumer, not a benefit. People talk about the price of petrol, but the proportion of the family budget spent in supermarkets is probably second only to housing costs.

The fear is that supermarkets will increase their stranglehold by expanding in other sectors, such as pharmaceuticals, banking and insurance—I understand that Tesco might even start to sell new cars. What is to be done? We cannot expect the supermarkets to curb their own appetites, because that is not in the nature of the beasts: they are profit-making organisations, and they will exploit their position as best they can. Therefore, the Government must act.

There must be no more mergers or takeovers by the big four. I understand that a merger between Safeway and Asda is being considered. The Government should tell them that that is not on—we do not want any increase in the dominant market share of the big four.

Next, we must consider the problem as it affects regions or cities. If a particular supermarket chain has several stores in an area, to the extent that it dominates the area, we should follow the example set by the Monopolies and Mergers Commission when it investigated the brewers. When it was decided that one chain had too many pubs in an area, it was told to sell off some to a competitor. That is what needs to be done with some supermarket outlets.

Certain supermarket practices described in the recent "Panorama" programme should be outlawed. I shall give only one example, so that the Minister has time to reply. A supermarket company tells a manufacturer that it must buy its packaging material from company X, or the supermarket will not take the product. The manufacturer could probably buy cheaper packaging from company Y, but company X gives a kickback to the supermarket. That cannot be right, and must be stopped.

The main challenge facing the Government is to ensure that the supermarket companies compete on price, even though, in an ideal world, we would not start with four big companies whose growth we were trying to restrict. The companies set up a price watch system to check prices in other supermarkets, but not so that prices can be kept low; instead, they price their goods similarly to other supermarkets in the area, so that there is no competition or price war. That cannot be right.

We must find a way of monitoring prices, so that we can tell when something is wrong and step in to ensure free competition. The supermarket bosses are too clever to go into a big room and hammer out a cartel agreement; instead, they use the price watch procedure to achieve the same results. We have to represent the customer. The Department of Trade and Industry has to tell supermarkets that there must be true and fair competition, so that the housewives of the United Kingdom can benefit from cheaper prices.

Mr. Colin Breed (South-East Cornwall): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the four supermarket companies to which he refers are complex monopolies? Each company consists of a huge number of single-store local monopolies, and therein lies the problem: each supermarket is, in itself, a local monopoly—a fact that is not recognised under current OFT rules.

Mr. Martlew: I covered that point when I spoke about superstores. They are the sole occupants of a site, to which the consumer has driven three or four miles. There is no competition nearby—probably the nearest competitor store is on the other side of the city—so the consumer buys from the superstore. The DTI must now give some guidance to the companies, and tell them, "The game is up. We know what you are doing, and it is going to stop."

1.17 pm

The Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs (Dr. Kim Howells): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) on having raised an important subject. It currently occupies a great deal of space in our newspapers, and rightly so, because it has an impact on every family in the country.

I find it amazing that, until the hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Mr. Hayes) arrived a few minutes ago, there was not a single Conservative Member, Plaid Cymru Member, or Scottish National party Member in the Chamber, despite the fact that they all paint themselves as the farmers' friends. I do not know about theirs, but my front room in Pontypridd has been full of farmers complaining about the buying power

of supermarkets. If Opposition Members were that concerned about the issue, they would have turned up for a debate on a subject that we rarely have the opportunity to discuss.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): That is why I am here.

Dr. Howells: I am glad that one Conservative Member is here—that is more than usually show up for debates such as these.

In no uncertain terms, my hon. Friend has emphasised the image of supermarket chains as market tyrants. I shall try to deal with the subject from the point of view of the Department of Trade and Industry. He has described how the big four—Tesco, Sainsbury, Asda and Safeway—have been able to dominate the buying market, especially the market for farm and primary products, and how they have moved into other areas.

My hon. Friend knows as well as I do that others would paint the supermarkets, especially the big four, as market heroes, citing as evidence their ventures into selling designer goods at low prices. Recently, the chief executive of one chain asked me, "Where is the sense in my being able to go to New York and buy a pair of top-range Levi Strauss jeans for $30 or $40, when they are sold in the high-street specialist outlets in this country for £55 a pair? There is something wrong with that." His chain is now selling those designer jeans at £30 a pair, and I am glad about that.

I glad that the supermarkets are pushing the edges of the envelope by exploiting the possibilities offered by so-called parallel or grey imports—terrible phrases, but unavoidable. They are introducing real competition into the markets for such goods. The high streets are no nirvana for shoppers. I am sure that an enormous amount of careful price calculation goes on—I was going to refer to price fixing, but as a Minister I can no longer use such terms.

Retailers are looking carefully at what the market can bear. Companies trading in well-known branded images and products can make a good profit in countries such as Bulgaria. However, those of us who are very naive and have simple views about these matters wonder why UK companies can buy those products in Bulgaria and sell them in this country—whether in the supermarkets or on the high street—at prices lower than those in retail outlets, and still make a profit. One wonders about the profit margin of those retailers that pitch the original price in this country. We must ask some serious questions, and my hon. Friend can rest assured that, as the new Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, I shall ask those questions every day. I want to uncover the real situation.

My hon. Friend asked about comparisons between United Kingdom prices and those across Europe and the United States. The DTI does not have a section that deals with pricing issues. I was amazed—I suppose I should not say that as a Minister who speaks on behalf of the DTI. I was told that such matters were too complex to examine, but I think it is about time that we had that information. I open newspapers every day and see price comparisons, some of which my hon. Friend mentioned. Where is my database that will allow me, as a Minister, to say what is and is not true?

The excellent officials in my Department are beginning to construct a prices database so that we will know where we are. Price information is very important for families in this country. I have seen articles and editorials in the *Sunday Times* that refer to "rip-off Britain". I am very glad that those reports have been published. Someone should try to compare the prices of goods in the United States, France or Canada with those in this country. That is an excellent policy for newspapers to adopt, and I shall respond as best I can.

My hon. Friend and the hon. Member for South-East Cornwall (Mr. Breed) have raised some interesting and important points in this debate. The definition of the boundary or extent of a market is vital. My hon. Friend's constituency of Carlisle is very much like many constituencies in Wales: it is a mix of urban and rural areas. It is easy for supermarkets to dominate a particular region or locality without having a dominant share of the UK market. We must examine that situation carefully, because dominance can easily distort markets, in terms of prices or selling power and so on.

I am extraordinarily glad that the right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark), and the hon. Members for Salisbury (Mr. Key) and for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson)—three very distinguished members of the Conservative party—have just entered the Chamber. It is excellent to see the hon. Member for Salisbury, for whom I have great regard, on the Front Bench. That is welcome news, because this is an important debate.

We are determined to ensure that there is transparency of pricing for all, whether it is the farmer trying to sell his farm produce to supermarket chains or the shopper trying to secure the best bargain. I think that that is what my hon. Friend is seeking. There are many variables involved in the selling equation. There is no question that supermarkets have revolutionised retailing. I will admit from the Dispatch Box that I quite enjoy shopping at my local Tesco. I like the fact that I can drive there and do my shopping for the week or the fortnight. There is wide choice inside the supermarket, and it is convenient. Unfortunately, the appalling car parking situation in my home town makes it difficult to shop in the town centre.

Mr. Breed: Does the Minister accept that, although dominance in the marketplace is not illegal as such, the abuse of that dominance is a concern? Companies may dominate the market, so long as they trade fairly.

Dr. Howells: The hon. Gentleman has put his finger on the problem. We must discover whether this country's great supermarket chains are abusing their dominant positions.

My hon. Friend mentioned that the Director General of Fair Trading, Mr. John Bridgeman, is currently examining this matter. His team at the Office of Fair Trading is investigating the profitability of the major supermarkets in the grocery sector, focusing on whether competition between the majors has been distorted to the detriment of consumers. Mr. Bridgeman is due to report early in the new year, and I am sure that all hon. Members are looking forward to those findings.

In the meantime, what evidence do we have of abuses of market power? It depends where we look. The farmers who were in my front room complaining about the situation will tell us that, yes, the market is being distorted and abused. We approached Tesco and pointed out that, although the current market price of a steer is £490, the shelf prices of the products derived from that steer total £1,124. We asked where that extra cost had come from.

[Dr. Howells]

The supermarket told me that it costs £634 to process the steer into saleable meat. It gave us a breakdown of that sum. It said that 63 per cent. of the steer is waste and must be thrown away, and that the remaining 37 per cent. of the steer must sell for an average of £5.13 per kilogram—or £2.33 per pound for those of us who still use the imperial system—in order to cover costs. Tesco also told us that £4.83 per kilogram is its average selling price, so it is making a 30p per kilogram loss on beef sales. *[Interruption.]* Hon. Members are groaning—and I can understand why. Those figures should be examined in light of the declared profits of some supermarket chains, and the OFT, under John Bridgeman, will do just that.

I do not think that it is easy to compare the profitability of United Kingdom supermarket companies. A report published this week by Verdict Research claims that there is no easy way of making that comparison. The report states:

"Verdict does not believe that Britain's grocers are overcharging . . . the market is too highly competitive for that to happen and competition is intensifying. The average operating profit margin of the four leading grocers has fallen by nearly one fifth, from 7.2 per cent. in 1992/93 to 6 per cent. in 1997/98. British grocers are not more profitable than their Continental counterparts once factors like longer European supplier payment terms, and the preponderance of leasehold property, are taken into account. UK retailers are all quoted and have traditionally sought to maximise their profitability to attract investors. Most Continental retailers are privately owned and minimise their reported profits in order to pay as little tax as possible. This helps give the impression that they are giving customers a much better deal than British companies."

My hon. Friend raised many issues in his short and very pertinent speech. Although we recognise the extra choice, convenience and lower prices that supermarkets have provided for consumers in the past 20 years, and although we welcome the entry of supermarkets into the retailing of non-food goods such as clothing and electrical products—which will strengthen competition in those sectors—I stress that, as Minister for Competition and Consumer Affairs, I shall continue to champion the rights of consumers. I welcome the OFT inquiry into the profitability of major supermarkets in the grocery sector. We will ensure that, at long last, the DTI becomes the consumers' champion.

Major Eric Joyce

1.30 pm

Mr. Keith Simpson (Mid-Norfolk): I am grateful for the opportunity to have this Adjournment debate concerning Major Joyce. I requested the debate because, over the past 16 months, my hon. Friends and I have failed to gain satisfactory answers from Ministers about the Major's future and because his case strikes at the heart of the important principle that our armed forces do not actively participate in party politics.

As the House will recall, in August 1997, Major Eric Joyce of the Adjutant-General's Corps published a Fabian Society pamphlet under the heading, "Labour in Action", entitled, "Arms and the Man—Renewing the armed services". He did so without first seeking permission from the Ministry of Defence, as is required by a serving officer under Queen's regulations. As Major Joyce said in an interview in *The Times* on 4 August 1997:

"you can't get radical ideas like this into the public domain if you go through the chain of command".

The Ministry of Defence was rightly concerned about what Major Joyce had done, and Members of Parliament should also be concerned. Much was made at the time by Major Joyce, through media interviews, of the fact that he was criticising senior Army officers as being class-ridden public school products.

I read his pamphlet with great interest. He touched on many issues, including recruitment, training, ethnic minorities and civil liberties. Much of what he said was controversial; some of it was interesting; some of it was obviously plain wrong and some of it was eccentric. It was really a political polemic.

We should ask two questions. Why was it necessary for Major Joyce, a serving Army officer, to publish his views in a Labour party publication? Why not use, for example, one of the in-house Ministry of Defence journals or one of many academic journals? The Major's action meant that the issue immediately became party political.

In the few months leading up to autumn 1997, we heard more from Major Joyce about his case and the possibility that he would face disciplinary charges. His wife was reported in *The Sunday Telegraph* on 12 October 1997 as saying that, if he was threatened with court martial, he would take the Army to the European Court of Human Rights. What emerged from those exchanges—it seemed that Major Joyce was hardly out of the media—was the fact, that despite being repeatedly warned not to speak to the media about his views, Major Joyce continued to do so.

I understand that Major Joyce believes that he has a basic right to air his views and that the Army was being old-fashioned and restrictive, but he is not living in the real world. Most public and private organisations maintain official and unofficial codes of conduct for their employees or members. Major Joyce continued to criticise senior officers and expected to have the right to do so. I put it to the House that most organisations, after giving warnings, would tell an employee that, if he continued his actions, they would reluctantly have to "let him go", to use the current management jargon.

In late October 1997, we learned through the press that Major Joyce could keep his job, provided that he did not again breach disciplinary codes, and was to keep his views

on the state of the Army to himself. He was given permission—for which he had urged very strongly in his pamphlet—to publish a journal called "The Armed Services Forum".

Why did the Army and the Ministry of Defence make that decision? We learned, once again through the press, that the Lord Chancellor had written to the Secretary of State for Defence advising him not to take action against Major Joyce because of the fear that, if the officer took his case to the European Court of Human Rights, any ruling would come up in the run-up to the next election, which

"would not be good timing".

Whatever right the Lord Chancellor has to involve himself across the board in departmental matters concerning the law, the letter has, to say the least, a party political spin, which is totally objectionable.

Ministers appeared to back Major Joyce when the Secretary of State for Defence said at a Fabian Society seminar—some coincidence there—on 13 November 1997 that he wanted to increase the number of officers from state schools. *The Daily Telegraph* on 14 November said:

"Mr. Robertson and other ministers are known to be sympathetic to Major Joyce's views."

There is an irony about the background of officers, MPs and Ministers and what kind of school they attended. Given Major Joyce's criticism that senior officers were out of touch with people because so many of them went to public schools, it is ironic that the Under-Secretary of State for Defence and the Minister for Defence Procurement—50 per cent. of the Ministers in the MOD—attended public schools. So what? We judge Ministers on how competent they are, not by their background, and it seems ironic that Major Joyce should not have taken that into account.

By the end of 1997, Major Joyce had successfully and repeatedly contravened Queen's regulations, but the Lord Chancellor had intervened on his behalf, there had been sympathetic noises from the Secretary of State for Defence and the Major had been told that he could continue his career and publish a journal but that he had to refrain from further public utterances. A number of his friends would have said that that was a reasonable compromise and, in many respects, from his perspective, he had won a political victory.

At that point in the case, party politics raised its head. When Major Joyce published his Labour party pamphlet in August 1997, he was already known by many Army friends at Upavon as a supporter of the Labour party. Indeed, he had helped the party during the general election. He told people at Upavon that he had thought about standing as a Labour parliamentary candidate in Scotland. In response to a question, the then Minister for the Armed Forces admitted that he had met Major Joyce twice before the general election.

From the new year onwards, Major Joyce's activities became less covert and more overtly party political. Despite being told not to speak to the media, he was quoted in *The Sunday Times* on 1 February 1998 as saying that he was definitely new Labour. On 14 June 1998, *The Sunday Times* told us that Major Joyce had been selected for a shortlist of Labour candidates for the Scottish Parliament. Through parliamentary questions in the summer, I learned that, despite blatantly breaking Queen's regulations, which state that service personnel should not take an active part in party politics and should resign if they want to stand as parliamentary candidates, no application to resign had been received from Major Joyce.

In November, Major Joyce appeared on Scottish television, where he was named as speaking on behalf of the Scottish Labour party. We learned in *The Times* on 25 November 1998 that Major Joyce is to be summoned before the Army Board and might face administrative discharge. On 29 November, in *The Sunday Times*, a rather emotional Major Joyce said that he might well take his case to the European Court of Human Rights. At that point, he lost not only his script, but any support or sympathy that he might have received from service personnel.

I suspect that Major Joyce would like to portray himself as the "Upavon one" or a latter-day Captain Alfred Dreyfus. He is neither. Even when given the benefit of the doubt when he published his pamphlet, he had his own political agenda. As a serving officer, he has openly been a Labour party supporter and, for the past four months, he has been actively seeking to become a parliamentary candidate. Not only has he repeatedly and blatantly broken every agreement that he has ever made, but he has become party politically partisan. He is honour bound to leave the Army and pursue his political career.

The case not only raises fundamental questions about the armed services not becoming involved in party politics, but casts serious doubts on ministerial judgment. My hon. Friend the Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) has written to the Secretary of State for Defence asking why Major Joyce has been able to flout the rules and regulations and openly participate in party politics. I know that the Minister took up his appointment only in the summer of this year, but I emphasise to him that many members of the armed services believe that Major Joyce has had "political top cover". That may not be true, but that is the impression among many service personnel.

I ask the House to consider what would have happened last year if a serving Army officer who had openly talked about becoming a Scottish National party candidate for the Scottish Parliament had written an article in a Scottish newspaper questioning the relevance of our nuclear deterrent. I suggest that he would have been out of the Army forthwith.

What would have happened this summer to a serving Army officer who intended being a Conservative Euro-candidate but who wrote an article for *The Spectator* criticising cuts in the Territorial Army? He would have been out. We know that for a fact because, in November, General Sir Michael Walker, Commander-in-Chief Land Command, wrote a letter warning all service men that, if they were caught leaking any information about the TA, they would be court-martialled. It seems that there is one rule for one act of indiscipline, and perhaps none for Major Joyce.

Ministers have got themselves into a mess. Service men are now somewhat bewildered about what they can and cannot do. There has been political interference in the Army by the Lord Chancellor. The Government are in danger of losing—

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Simpson: I am sorry; I am winding up my comments.

[Mr. Simpson]

The Government are in danger of losing the confidence of our service personnel. All hon. Members should support the principle that serving service personnel do not involve themselves in party or partisan politics.

I assure the House that, if any serving officer who intended becoming a Conservative candidate wished to criticise the Army, I would advise him immediately to leave the Army and pursue his point as far as he could in a political career. That is now a well-established tradition. In the past, serving personnel were allowed to sit in Parliament. That was to the detriment of the services, and it caused all kinds of disruption and, indeed, some disloyalty. It also threatened civil-military relations.

This case is about not only Major Joyce—he will do what he wants to do—but a very important principle. Service men are entitled to hold political beliefs. They express them very strongly to us, as it is right and proper that they should, but we should defend the principle, set out in Queen's regulations, that, if a serving member of the armed forces wishes actively to join a political party or to pursue a parliamentary career, he should resign. That is what Major Joyce should have done.

1.43 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Mr. Doug Henderson): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk (Mr. Simpson), who has allowed us the opportunity to explain the Army's handling of the Major Joyce case and to reiterate the Government's position on the issue. The hon. Gentleman mentioned the letter from the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. I hope to deal with some of the points covered in that letter, in addition to those raised by the hon. Gentleman.

I must say at the outset that I reject absolutely any suggestion that there has been any "political top cover" in this case. I shall cover some of the principles involved in the case and then give a brief account of the events of the Joyce case.

Major Joyce is a serving officer of the British Army. He is the author of a discussion paper from the Fabian Society—a society, which, incidentally, is not a Labour party body—published in August 1997 and entitled "Arms and the Man—Renewing the Armed Services". The personal views contained in that paper are, in a number of respects, critical of the present management of the Army.

The action being taken by the Army against Major Joyce is of an administrative rather than a disciplinary nature. I am sure that the House will understand that, in my comments today, I must take care not to prejudice the outcome of that management action.

Major Joyce's actions were of concern to the Army not because of the content of his article, or, indeed, of his subsequent articles, but because the manner of its release showed complete disregard of Queen's regulations and of his commanding officer.

Mr. Cohen: Will my hon. Friend confirm that a consultation process on the strategic defence review was about to begin at the time in question and that that consultation process itself was still under discussion? I recall going to a meeting with his predecessor and commenting on how it could be improved. In those circumstances, was it not reasonable for an officer to put his views in the way that Major Joyce did?

Mr. Henderson: There is a clear distinction between the responsibilities of an Army officer in discharging his duties, expressing his views, being consistent with Army policy and seeking approval for the expression of those views in any form, and the privileges that a citizen of this country has in being able to express views on any subject that he wishes. An Army officer, like any citizen of this country, has the right to free expression, but he must be able to draw that distinction. It is an important distinction, which I hope that all our Army personnel would recognise. It is certainly one that I confirm as crucial in the execution of the Army's responsibilities.

The Army is, after all, a part of society, and its values must reflect those of society. However, it is a cohesive and disciplined force. Its effectiveness—and, ultimately, the safety of every individual soldier in it—depends on individual and collective respect for that discipline.

The sort of requirements imposed by Queen's regulations on serving personnel are not novel. They mirror those that apply throughout the civil service and elsewhere in the public sector. They require that anyone wishing to publish views and opinions seek permission in advance. The regulations pertaining to political activities by serving members of the armed forces have been clearly explained to Major Joyce, and it is therefore disappointing that he has chosen not to act in accordance with them.

The decision to investigate the authorship by Major Joyce of a publication and some newspaper articles which were critical of aspects of defence policy and recruitment was taken by the Army chain of command. Such action simply followed established Army procedures. Ministers were not at any time involved in either the decision to investigate Major Joyce's actions or in the course that the inquiry took. The temporary suspension of Major Joyce in August 1997, while an investigation was conducted, was not a disciplinary action, and was not recorded as such.

The completed investigation report was forwarded by Major Joyce's chain of command to the Army prosecuting authority for consideration. The report was not copied to, or seen by, Ministers. I should like to reassure the House that the Army prosecuting authority is independent of, and cannot be directed by, the military chain of command or, indeed, Ministers on any cases that it is asked to consider. It is subject only to legal oversight by the Attorney-General.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Henderson: I shall give way, but the hon. Gentleman is taking up some of the time that I need to explain the background to the case.

Mr. Blunt: Will the Minister confirm that the Lord Chancellor's letter was seen by the Army prosecuting authority before it came to its decision?

Mr. Henderson: I cannot confirm that because I do not know what information the Army prosecuting authority had in examining whether there was a case against Major Joyce. It is quite rightly a matter for the authority, not for Ministers.

The decision whether to prosecute a case referred to the Army prosecuting authority is based on the realistic prospect of obtaining a conviction based on the evidence, and on whether a prosecution is in the interests of the public and the service. It will depend on an assessment of all pertinent legal, evidential and procedural issues. The tests are essentially the same as those applied to the Crown Prosecution Service. I hope that the hon. Member for Mid-Norfolk agrees that it would not be appropriate to disclose the basis on which the Army prosecuting authority reached its decision not to court-martial Major Joyce. Indeed, it would not be appropriate for Ministers to be aware of that basis, let alone disclose it.

Major Joyce returned to work in September 1997, when he was posted to a job appropriate to his rank in the Adjutant-General's Corps at Worthy Down. That move was deemed necessary because Major Joyce had irrevocably undermined the confidence of his former employing officer. Major Joyce continued to seek and receive media attention in continued disregard for Queen's regulations. That behaviour led, in October 1997, to a formal warning.

In February 1998, Major Joyce was formally interviewed by his commanding officer, in which he was informed of his commanding officer's recommendation to the military secretary that he should not be employed further in the Army. Major Joyce was then sent home. He has remained away from work since that time. He has made no application to resign or retire from the Army. The recommendations made by Major Joyce's commanding officer to the Army chain of command concerning his future in the Army should be properly confidential between the two parties. However, I would reassure the House that Ministers have played no part whatever, either formally or informally, in the process, which is on-going.

The time taken to conclude the review of Major Joyce's future in the Army is regretted, but not without explanation. The procedure is considered and measured, and gives the individual the fullest opportunity to make representation at every stage of the process. Until the process is complete, an officer properly continues to be paid, and his terms and conditions of service remain extant.

The matter is being considered at Army board level by two non-ministerial members of the board who have not previously been involved in handling the case. Major Joyce has seen, and had the opportunity to comment on, all material before the board, save only for legal advice. He has been offered the opportunity of an oral hearing with the board later this month, at which his solicitor may be present if he so wishes. The decision on Major Joyce's future in the Army will be taken exclusively by those Army board members. Ministers have no involvement in the process unless Major Joyce is dissatisfied with the Army board's decision in respect of redress of a complaint and petitions the sovereign. In that case, the Army's submission would be forwarded to the Palace through the Secretary of State.

Many things can be said on this issue. I want to make it clear that I reject entirely any suggestion of a political cover-up or of any inappropriate ministerial involvement. Inevitably, there have been discussions between Ministers and between Ministers and officials on the handling of the public and parliamentary aspects that have arisen in the case, but in no other regard has there been any involvement, as has been suggested. The treatment of Major Joyce by the Army chain of command has been entirely fair and reasonable.

It being before Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

Oral Answers to Questions

WALES

The Secretary of State was asked—

National Assembly

1. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): If he will make a statement on the *(a)* construction and *(b)* cost of the National Assembly. [61559]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): Anyone who has experience of a major public building project will know that we are at an early stage in the design process. I want to involve a wide range of interested groups in the process, including political party leaders in Wales, disabled people, young people and, as matters progress, Assembly Members. The capital cost was identified, during the legislative process, as £17 million, and that figure is not expected to increase. Running costs were identified as between £15 million and £20 million, and I have no reason to differ with those figures.

Mr. Gray: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for his answer, and I am glad that he has taken such care in making detailed plans for the location and cost of the Assembly. However, would it not have been better for a party that is overwhelmingly committed to devolution of decisions to wait until the Assembly was up and running—only months from now—and allow Assembly Members to take their own decisions about the Assembly's location, cost and design?

Mr. Michael: Obviously, the hon. Gentleman knows as much about major building projects as he does about devolution. The planning and the building—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman were listening to the answer to his question, I might think that he had come into the Chamber with a real question, not simply to try to score points. Any major building project takes time to develop, and people need to be involved in that process in order to ensure that we have a building for the Assembly of which Wales will be proud, and which will demonstrate to the world outside the confidence with which the Assembly is being established. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will look on with interest as that happens.

Mr. Ron Davies (Caerphilly): This is my first opportunity in the House to congratulate my right hon. Friend on his appointment as Secretary of State. May I therefore take the opportunity to convey to him my good wishes and support over the coming months? They will be very exciting for Wales, and they will be very challenging and demanding for everyone at the Welsh Office. I send my best wishes to all who will be involved in the coming period.

On the subject of the Assembly, my right hon. Friend will know of my gratitude to his constituency predecessor, now Lord Callaghan, and a very distinguished panel of judges who have brought forward the Richard Rogers design concept. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that that is the concept that he is now developing for the Assembly building, and will he tell the House whether he has any proposals for developing that design in a way that embraces the express wishes of the people of Wales?

Mr. Michael: I thank my right hon. Friend for his remarks. May I return the compliment by congratulating him on his bearing throughout what has been an extremely difficult time for him personally? I am also grateful to him for giving me the opportunity to join him in thanking my predecessor, Lord Callaghan, who has brought enormous experience and wisdom to bear on the project of considering the potential designs.

I am happy to confirm that I feel that the process is moving forward very well indeed; it is on a sound basis. One or two people seem to have thought that there might be some doubt about the process going forward. I have never said anything that was intended to encourage that idea. The one thing that I did say initially was that I would look to be fully briefed before making any comment. Having been briefed, and having looked with the architects at the design concept, I believe that it is very exciting, but it is only a concept at this stage, and it needs to develop in a way that respects the nature of the Assembly that we are trying to create, and that is as inclusive as possible. I believe that it has the potential to be developed in that way.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): Can the Secretary of State for Wales confirm that the budget for advertising the elections to the Welsh Assembly is in the region of £2 million? If that is the case, can he confirm that the people of Wales will be astonished to learn that that is the figure, and that they will believe that the money could be far better spent on hospitals in Wales, on schools in Wales or on law and order in Wales?

Will the Secretary of State also take on board the fact that the advertising campaign should be conducted on an all-party basis? Will he be inviting representatives of the political parties in Wales to discuss the campaign for the elections to the Welsh Assembly?

Mr. Michael: I am not sure that the hon. Gentleman's choice of words is accurate. We are talking about information being available so that people understand the elections in which they have an opportunity to take part as distinct from campaigns, which are for the individual political parties to run. The hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that I wish to be inclusive in the way in which we debate these matters, which is why I have met the leaders of the political parties in Wales to discuss their concerns. Opposition parties have a place in the political process, as does the majority party, which Labour intends to continue to be.

I welcome the hon. Gentleman's interest in education, schools and law and order in Wales. It will be something of a surprise to the people of Wales. A specific budget has not been set aside at this stage. We shall enter into those matters in due course.

EU Structural Funds

2. **Mr. John Wilkinson** (Ruislip-Northwood): If he will meet the Commission of the European Union to discuss the Principality's eligibility for EU structural funds under the EU financial perspective for the years 2000 to 2006. [61560]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): Over the past year, Ministers have been fully involved in discussions at the United Kingdom level and in Brussels, and will continue to be so in the new year.

Mr. Wilkinson: Is it not the case that west Wales and the valleys have a gross domestic product per head of 72 per cent. of the national average? That is significantly below the threshold of 75 per cent., which is eligibility for objective 1 status for structural funds. How is it that it seems likely that that eligibility will not lead to any award of structural funds for this region, which is the second poorest after Cornwall? How is it that huge tracts of the country will not have objective 2 status? Is it not the case that the people of Wales would be much better off if they gave less of their money to Brussels, because they get so little back?

Mr. Hain: I have always known that the hon. Gentleman is bonkers on Europe; however, this question has taken the biscuit. The hon. Gentleman has it wrong. The proportion of European average gross domestic product of west Wales and the valleys is 71 per cent., which will mean that the region will qualify for structural funds under objective 1 status. We shall be negotiating with the European Commission and with our European partners through the British Government, who strongly support Wales's bid, to ensure that we achieve the maximum possible benefit.

Mr. Alan W. Williams (East Carmarthen and Dinefwr): Will my hon. Friend give some account of the work of the task force that was set up to gain objective 1 status and to make good use of the money? Does he agree that local authorities have a critical role to play in developing a raft of schemes that will qualify for objective 1 funding so that we shall be off to a flying start if the funds come through in 2000?

Mr. Hain: Yes. I strongly agree with my hon. Friend that the work of the task force will be critical in mobilising maximum resources from public funds and from the private sector working with local authorities. He makes a good point. The task force should be working now to ensure that Wales is well able to take the maximum opportunity available to it when the funds come in from 1 January 2000. We can learn from Ireland, which has been extraordinarily successful in this respect. Wales can emulate Ireland and regenerate the whole of west Wales and the valleys, which have been so badly decimated by nearly 20 years of Tory rule.

Mr. Richard Livsey (Brecon and Radnorshire): With reference to new structural funding, is the Minister able to reassure us that agricultural decline and sparsity of population in areas such as Powys will be considered fully in relation to their attaining objective 2 status in future, at the same time as other parts of Wales attain objective 1 status?

Mr. Hain: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. The Government are seeking to persuade the European Commission to alter the eligibility criteria for objective 2 funding in particular, which focuses far too narrowly on unemployment rates. A variety of additional factors should be taken into account, including the one to which the hon. Gentleman refers, and Powys's situation is of particular concern to us.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): First, will my hon. Friend confirm—there have been many newspaper reports about this—that the valleys and west Wales have now been designated for objective 1 status? Has that been decided? Secondly, we read in the newspapers about the sum of £2 billion. Over the six years, will that sum be available to south Wales, the valleys and west Wales?

Mr. Hain: My right hon. Friend raises some important points both for his constituency in Llanelli and for the whole of the designated NUTS 2 area, which has been accepted by Eurostat as qualifying for objective 1 status. As it meets the below 75 per cent. of GDP criterion, it will qualify, but we must negotiate with our European partners. The negotiations will take place in March to ensure that the status is confirmed and to agree the figure that my right hon. Friend mentions. We hope to get the maximum benefit, and it has been suggested that west Wales and the valleys could be entitled to some £1.5 billion to £2 billion.

Public Transport

3. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): What steps he is taking to encourage better co-ordination between train and bus services within the Principality. [61561]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Peter Hain): Our policy statement "Transporting Wales into the Future" will deliver more through ticketing, improved interchange facilities, better connections between services and improved availability of passenger information.

Mr. Baker: Although I accept that the Government have done what they can to solve the problem of poor train connections, will the Minister seriously address the problem of poor train and bus connections? In Machynlleth, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik), one can arrive on a train to find that the bus departed moments earlier and the next bus leaves hours later. What will the Minister do to address that consequence of Tory privatisation?

Mr. Hain: I am pleased that the hon. Gentleman is so well briefed on Machynlleth's problems and I share with him and the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) the desire to improve its bus and train interconnections. We have already made considerable progress, particularly on the Cardiff valley line, which now has bus interconnections with many of the valley towns on its route. Unlike our Tory predecessors, we are injecting extra resources into integrated transport packages which promote public transport to the maximum possible extent.

Unemployment

4. **Mr. Dafydd Wigley** (Caernarfon): If he will make a statement on unemployment levels in *(a)* Gwynedd and *(b)* Wales. [61562]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): Seasonally adjusted figures show that, in October, there were 67,800 people unemployed in Wales. That represents 5.4 per cent. of the labour force. On an unadjusted basis, the rate was 5.3 per cent. Figures for unitary authorities are available only on an unadjusted basis. In Gwynedd, there were 3,540 people unemployed on that basis, a rate of 6.4 per cent.

Mr. Wigley: Does the Secretary of State accept that the level of unemployment in Gwynedd is unacceptably high and that something must be done about it as a matter of urgency? In that context, what is happening in the review of the regional assistance maps under the Industry Acts, and will the right hon. Gentleman bear in mind the need to ensure a correlation between areas of high unemployment and those designated for the highest level of regional development?

Mr. Michael: The right hon. Gentleman says that something must be done, and I agree with him. However, on the unadjusted figures, Gwynedd had 9 per cent. unemployment in October 1996 and that is down to 5.3 per cent this year, as I said. That represents real progress. The impact of objective 1 status will be considerable, but the right hon. Gentleman is right to point to the need also to promote assisted area status in Wales. In the past few weeks, I have announced the financial package for farmers in Wales; I have been to Newtown to ram home the priority of helping west and mid-Wales with the Welsh Development Agency; we have come to the brink of achieving objective 1 status; and we are making clear our intention to help areas such as Gwynedd in a variety of ways.

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): Given that the jobs problem may worsen in the coming months, shall we not be more and more dependent on the new deal? In that context, will my right hon. Friend comment on the failure of many of the quangos in Wales—training and enterprise councils, health trusts and health authorities—to employ anyone under the new arrangements? Are not those organisations letting Wales and the Government down?

Mr. Michael: I am pleased to tell my hon. Friend that we have taken up that issue. The Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), has written to those bodies expressing the wish that they should provide opportunities through the new deal.

We want the new deal to bring people into jobs and employability, so it is important that we should continue to grow jobs in Wales as well as attracting jobs into Wales. As my hon. Friend says, there have been job losses but, in recent weeks, there have also been job gains in many parts of Wales, both in north and south Wales. However, we need to keep the pressure up through the new deal and with long-term sustainable jobs.

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): Does the Secretary of State expect unemployment in Wales to be higher or lower at the time of the Welsh Assembly elections?

Mr. Michael: To some extent, that depends on how the economy develops. It would be interesting to know what the hon. Gentleman expects. I rather think that, at the time of the general election, he did not expect to see unemployment coming down, as it has under this Government.

Dr. Fox: It is extraordinary that the Secretary of State is not confident that unemployment will continue to fall, as it did under the Conservatives in a way that has benefited Wales so much. It is a little ironic that the Secretary of State is putting the most energy into his own job search. He wants to represent his own constituency, to represent a totally different constituency in another part of Wales, to remain Secretary of State for Wales and to lead Labour in the Welsh Assembly. As others are beginning to lose their jobs, the right hon. Gentleman wants not one, two or three jobs, but four jobs. Is that what the new deal means to the Secretary of State in Wales?

Mr. Michael: It is kind of the hon. Gentleman to expose to the House the fact that neither he nor his party has the slightest interest in the people on whom unemployment in Wales bears down. He is interested in scoring cheap points. Labour Members are interested in helping those in jobs to keep them, and in finding jobs for the unemployed. The hon. Gentleman has marked out the difference between us.

Mr. Barry Jones (Alyn and Deeside): In the past four months, my constituency has lost more than 400 jobs—for example, 200 at the Optical Fibres plant, 150 at Shotton steelworks and 100 with the closure of the Kimberly-Clark factory. In addition, I, my constituents and my county council fear that the Commission in Brussels may well plan to strip my constituency of its assisted area status. I look to my right hon. Friend and the Government to tell the Commission that that should not happen in a constituency which only recently suffered the largest redundancy ever in Europe when we lost 8,000 jobs at Shotton.

Mr. Michael: I have sympathy with my hon. Friend. I referred earlier to the fact that there have been job losses and gains in various parts of Wales. The immediate situation has led to some problems for my hon. Friend. There are some things that will help, such as the power station announcement for Shotton Paper. However, I take on board my hon. Friend's points, and I look forward to spending some time with him in his constituency in the coming weeks to discuss with employers, trade unionists and others the problems and aspirations that he shares with them in his constituency.

Drug Abuse

5. **Mr. Peter Viggers** (Gosport): If he will make a statement about drug abuse in rural Wales. [61563]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jon Owen Jones): Drug misuse is a threat to all our communities, whether rural or otherwise. We are determined to tackle this very serious problem.

Mr. Viggers: Does the Minister believe that people who are convicted of drug supply offences should be deprived of public housing and, if so, should that happen in rural Wales or in the whole of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Jones: How best to deal with drug abuse and the housing problems suffered not just by the drug abusers but by their families is a difficult problem which must be considered in an holistic way.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): The Minister refers to an holistic way. How precisely will the drugs problem in rural Wales be tackled? A few years ago, there was no problem in rural areas, but now there is a huge problem. What approach will be adopted, which agencies will be involved and what will be done?

Mr. Jones: In Wales, we have embarked on a strategy of having five drug and alcohol action teams, which help to co-ordinate all the important agencies—social services, education, the police, the Prison Service and the probation service. That is what I mean by an holistic approach to the problem, which is complex, not single-issue. We need to bring in all the agencies that will be involved in trying to help with this difficult and growing problem.

NHS Trusts

6. **Mr. John Smith** (Vale of Glamorgan): If he will make a statement on the reconfiguration of NHS trusts in Wales. [61564]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): On 3 December, I announced decisions to reconfigure NHS trusts in Wales. Details were circulated to hon. Members representing Welsh constituencies on that day. Waiting list figures have been announced today by the Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff, Central (Mr. Jones). Figures are going down, which is another step towards delivering another of our manifesto promises. I accept that we have a long way to go, but we are on the way.

Mr. Smith: May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on the leadership skills that he has displayed in handling and dealing with that difficult issue in Wales? He has managed to strike a balance between the genuine concerns of local people—in my constituency in particular—and the need to make bold decisions to meet our future health needs. Can he give me an assurance that the quality of services at Llandough hospital and community health services in the Vale of Glamorgan will not be reduced as a result of these proposals? Will he meet my community health council to discuss its future, in view of the reconfiguration?

Mr. Michael: I am happy to meet representatives of the Vale of Glamorgan community health council, as my hon. Friend requests. I assure him that the service provided at Llandough hospital and in community services in the Vale of Glamorgan will remain integrated. I hope that services will continue to be of a high standard and, indeed, improve. I also assure him that the statement last week was the beginning, not the conclusion, of the job of improving health services in every locality in Wales. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. The House must settle down. It is rather noisy.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): Is it not the case that the reconfiguration exercise has been a half-hearted business, and that it will cause more disruption than gains through administrative savings? Is it not also the case that, as long as there are health authorities and trusts, there is an internal market? Do Ministers now accept that there should be an internal market in the NHS? If not, would they not be better abolishing all the trusts and moving to the kind of integrated system of health care and commissioning that is appropriate to Wales, and that would be cost-effective and acceptable in Wales?

Mr. Michael: The hon. Gentleman's question is rather odd, but I shall try to respond. We are certainly ending the fruitless competition between different parts of the health service in Wales. That is the purpose of creating trusts that are large enough and contain the three elements—acute, community and mental health services—to provide a single health service for the people of Wales. We have tried to recognise the unusual circumstances in his area—and in Powys, for example—which need to be dealt with by respecting local need. The example of health savings that we have is those achieved by the Pembrokeshire and Derwen merger, which exceeded what was anticipated.

Savings from that merger alone are £750,000. I am, therefore, confident that significant savings—perhaps larger than we have predicted—can be made and delivered back into patient care. I repeat my undertaking to meet the hon. Gentleman, and representatives of the health services and people who depend on them, in Ceredigion to discuss the specific circumstances there, which I know are difficult.

Mr. Win Griffiths (Bridgend): Can my right hon. Friend tell me whether he intends to set individual efficiency targets for each of the trusts, whether they are new or have been left untouched by the changes? Can he foresee even greater savings and improvements in the delivery of health services in Wales coming out of that?

Mr. Michael: We expect the health service, including trusts, to meet efficiency targets. New trusts should present to us their plans for creating an effective, integrated health service for their areas. They should set targets and explain their intentions. I hope that we can make improvements in the health service together, and that trusts will achieve the targets that they have helped to set and which go beyond those set nationally. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend because, when he was a Minister, he did a great deal of the spadework required to achieve the improvements that we seek.

Madam Speaker: Order. If the Minister does not speak into the microphone, his words will not be recorded.

Livestock Industry

7. **Mr. Owen Paterson** (North Shropshire): If he will make a statement on the Welsh livestock industry. [61565]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Jon Owen Jones): The Department is working with the Welsh Development Agency and the industry to develop an action plan for the lamb and beef sectors, which will be published in the new year. Coupled with the lifting of the beef export ban, it will provide a basis for the Welsh livestock industry to strengthen its competitiveness and adapt to meet the challenges facing it.

Mr. Paterson: I do not want to be churlish, but the lifting of the beef ban 10 days ago was only a partial

success. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] If hon. Members would listen, they would learn that one of Britain's premier exporters of quality beef told me 10 days ago that the beef that is most in demand by high-quality restaurants and distributors is beef on the bone for large roasts and T-bone steaks. When will the ban on beef on the bone be lifted, so that abattoirs can take the substantial commercial risk of dedicating a whole plant to export business?

Mr. Jones: The hon. Gentleman is being churlish. The Conservative Government were responsible for the total failure that resulted in the imposition of a beef ban.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Does my hon. Friend agree that the livestock industry in Wales has greatly welcomed the lifting of the beef export ban, which was negotiated by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture? Does not that show that the interests of Welsh farmers will be much better served by the Government's positive approach to Europe, as opposed to the anti-European posturing of the Conservative party?

Mr. Jones: I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a very good point. To secure its future, our industry must regain the markets in Europe that it has lost. That will be difficult, but it can be done. The industry must increase confidence. Confidence will return but, unfortunately, Conservative Members continue to run down the industry that they pretend to champion.

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones (Ynys Môn): Does the Minister accept that there is widespread dismay among the agricultural community in Wales about the level of support that the Welsh Office is able to give to the tir gofal scheme? Does he realise that that is an important instrument of social economic policy in Wales? Will he make it clear that the Government are committed to the scheme and will ensure that it is properly funded?

Mr. Jones: The Government are committed to the scheme. The initial funding may not be as great as the hon. Gentleman would like, but it will increase year on year. It must be borne in mind that that funding is in addition to the £21 million-worth of aid that the farming package has released for Welsh farmers. The hon. Gentleman, if he represents people in the industry, should be thankful for the Government's support for Welsh farmers.

Special Advisers

8. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If he will list the special advisers he has appointed. [61566]

The Secretary of State for Wales (Mr. Alun Michael): The Prime Minister has approved the appointment as special advisers of Mr. Gareth Williams, who has extensive experience in government at European and local level, and Ms Julie Crowley, who, I must make it clear, has been appointed for her communication skills, although she is also a fanatical supporter of Neath rugby club.

Mr. Swayne: What advice will the right hon. Gentleman receive from those individuals? Would they have been able to advise him on the wisdom of seeking election to the House in one constituency and to the Welsh Assembly in a different one?

Mr. Michael: I am glad to say that both appointees are working on policy issues. They are working to deliver the Labour Government's election promises in Wales: to improve health, to create jobs, to increase opportunity, to improve education standards and to create safer communities. If the hon. Gentleman were interested in such issues, he would have asked about them, rather than simply trying to score points.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [61589] **Sir Peter Tapsell** (Louth and Horncastle): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 9 December.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further meetings later today.

Throughout the day, I have been kept informed of developments in the efforts to establish the facts in the tragic and horrifying killing of the hostages in Chechnya. I am sure that the whole House will join me in expressing condolences to the families and friends of the victims.

Sir Peter Tapsell: Is the right hon. Gentleman content with the ever-growing prospect of his being remembered as the Prime Minister who destroyed the United Kingdom and subjected England to foreign tax collectors?

The Prime Minister: There speaks the authentic voice of today's Conservative party. No: we believe in the policies of devolution, we believe in a constructive attitude in Europe—and, actually, I would prefer to be remembered for having destroyed the Conservative party.

Mr. David Chaytor (Bury, North): Is my right hon. Friend aware of a recent case at Bury general hospital, involving deaths following alleged misdiagnoses of cancer sufferers and the recall of 40 women for a review of their test results? Does he share my concern about the fact that, in such instances, the medical profession has an unfortunate habit of closing ranks? Does he agree that the case shows how important it is that nurses should be confident enough to report their anxieties to senior management, and also shows the importance of improved quality control in regard to consultants' records? Can he assure us that the Government are committed to improving that quality control?

The Prime Minister: As well as putting extra money into cancer services in the NHS, we shall introduce a new system in the national health service Bill. The aim of that system will be to monitor the quality of decisions, to offer advice, and to give us the best chance of ensuring that the tragic events to which my hon. Friend has referred are not

repeated. It is important for us to introduce those proper quality controls, so that people can have faith in their diagnoses.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): After all the bluster that we have heard from the Government about harmonising European taxes, is it not amazing that the letter that the Prime Minister signed this morning, along with the German Chancellor, fails to rule out the harmonising of capital taxes, fails to rule out the harmonisation of savings taxes, fails to rule out the harmonisation of value-added taxes and calls explicitly for more harmonisation of corporate taxes? Is this not the latest attempt to cover up the threat of tax harmonisation with meaningless reassurances and waffle?

The Prime Minister: In the matter of bluster, I recognise when I have met my match. As for taxes, we have made our position clear. We will oppose any measure that is against Britain's national interests, in taxes or in any other regard. What we will not do is return to the years of Conservative diplomacy that left this country without influence at the margins of Europe. We will not do that, because it is not in the British national interest.

Mr. Hague: Has the Prime Minister seen what the German Government have been saying to the French press over recent hours? A Bonn official, who asked not to be named, said that Germany was also hoping in Vienna for progress towards harmonising taxes, as Germany is a high-tax, high-regulatory state, while countries such as Britain can be more attractive to businesses because they have lower taxes and fewer regulations. Where is the Prime Minister's diplomacy when that is the actual agenda of the German Government? Will the right hon. Gentleman therefore come clean and tell the House the Commons which British tax reliefs the Financial Secretary is now negotiating to harmonise away?

The Prime Minister: The only Government who agreed to harmonise taxes in the UK were the last Conservative Government, just as they agreed more qualified majority voting than any Government have done before or since. I repeat: we will judge every issue according to the British national interest. We have no intention of agreeing to raise taxes across Europe. We want a lower tax burden on our people, but the way in which to get that argument through is to win the argument by staying firm and engaged, not by glorying in it, as the Conservative party is doing as an excuse to indulge its anti-Europeanism.

Mr. Hague: Nothing that the Prime Minister has done remotely resembles standing firm. If he will not tell the House what is actually being negotiated, we will, because we have the list here: the shipping tax relief that he voted for; the film tax relief that he introduced; the enterprise zones that his constituents work in. Those are currently being negotiated. No wonder the European tax Commissioner says that the Government are "fully on board" with tax harmonisation. Is not the Prime Minister's endless habit of saying one thing to one audience and another to another finally catching up with him? Is not the truth that, however much he protests, no one believes him on that subject any more?

The Prime Minister: First, the issues that the right hon. Gentleman raises are from the code of conduct working party on tax. The code of conduct working party was established under the previous Government. Secondly, as for what the rest of Europe thinks, let me give him just a sample of what the rest of Europe is saying. The French Prime Minister said:

"Neither the French nor the British have any thought about unifying taxes. Harmonisation does not mean uniform tax. Nobody wants somebody else to choose for his country corporation tax or income tax."

The Irish Deputy Prime Minister said:

"Instead of calling for what would effectively be higher corporate taxes, European leaders should be concentrating on bringing corporate and other taxes down."

The Spanish Prime Minister said that higher taxes

"would be a recipe for inefficiency and higher costs."

The Italian Finance Minister said that the harmonisation of corporation tax

"would be untimely, questionable and above all hardly feasible".

The European employers said:

"Tax competition is the only counterweight against the constant upward pressure on Government revenues."

There is a debate going on in the European Union, but what is important is not to exercise the old Tory tactic of using the debate as an excuse to get out of Europe. We should use it rather as an opportunity to make the case for a sensible Europe for all our futures.

Mr. Hague: What does our Prime Minister say? One thing in one place—in the House of Commons—and another thing in the Council of Ministers. The people who are driving tax harmonisation are the European socialist politicians whom he has encouraged for years. We have only to look at the Foreign Secretary's biography:

"Cook finished his long day"—

Labour Members will be interested in this—

"with a visit to Oskar Lafontaine at the headquarters of the SPD. Lafontaine"

is

"an old friend from the Socialist International . . . The two gave each other a bear hug, for old times' sake."

Anyone who is prepared to give the Foreign Secretary a bear hug is capable of harmonising the taxes of the United Kingdom.

Can the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, in the words of Oskar Lafontaine,

"our British colleagues have asked us not to use the word harmonisation, but co-ordination"?

Is it not clear from that remark that harmonisation and co-ordination mean exactly the same?

The Prime Minister: The moment the right hon. Gentleman gets back to his debating points, he reckons he is on strong ground. As he is quoting, perhaps it would be best if I quoted to him the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, who said:

"The next time that I have a discussion with William, I shall seek to reassure him that the views of Oskar Lafontaine are not likely to be the views of the European Union."

That is what the Conservative former Chancellor said.

The truth of the matter—and the strategic error that the right hon. Gentleman has made—is that the shadow Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is running Conservative European policy. That is where the

Conservative party is today. It has decided that it wants to be an anti-European party, and it will get support from certain quarters for that.

The Conservatives can have that support. I will defend the British national interest—that is the difference between us—because it requires this country to be part of Europe. It is important that we are a part of Europe. Whatever smart debating points the Leader of the Opposition makes in this debate, the truth is that his position would return us to the years of Conservative isolation. There is no better example of that than the beef war. Two years of Conservative diplomacy; a declared war on Europe; no result. Eighteen months of Labour Government; the ban lifted. End of story.

Mr. Hague *rose—*

Hon. Members: Oh!

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. Hague: Whenever the Prime Minister mentions smart debating points, we know that he has none of his own, and he has just shown that again. There is nothing anti-European about believing that we should decide our taxes here in the House of Commons. The truth is that the right hon. Gentleman now has to ask the Germans to use a different word. He has become the Basil Fawlty of Europe. Every time he meets a German, he goes around saying, "Don't mention the tax harmonisation." The letter that I have here is yet another example of his giving one impression in Europe and another in the United Kingdom. We have no guarantees that any commitment that he makes in the House he will keep in the Council of Ministers; that any principle to which he was attached last week is a principle to which he is attached this week; or that we can be confident that any promise he makes now he will stand by tomorrow.

The Prime Minister: I do not think that the right hon. Gentleman is getting very far on this matter. I simply repeat that there is a debate in Europe about the future direction of Europe. There is a debate about economic reform, and tax is a part of it. We will win that debate if we stay firm but stay engaged. The choice is between two different approaches to Europe. The only Government who agreed to tax harmonisation were a Conservative Government. For example, at the Vienna summit this week, we will ask that the duty free issue be reopened. Why do we have to ask that? Because the Conservative Government agreed to harmonisation and the abolition of duty free. We will try to get our way by staying firm to the British national interest, but staying engaged in Europe. The right hon. Gentleman has given in to the Euro-sceptic wing of his party, which is running his policy. He wants to glory in every obstacle in Europe because it is an excuse to be anti-European. We see those obstacles as things to be overcome because it is in this country's interests to be part of Europe. That is the difference between us.

Mr. Ivan Lewis (Bury, South): Will my right hon. Friend consider asking his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry whether he will incorporate a new clause into the fairness at work legislation—the right of hereditary peers to claim unfair dismissal when they are sacked simply for pursuing the objectives of their employer? Furthermore, will he ensure that in such cases the compensation cap is withdrawn?

The Prime Minister: Lord Cranborne said to the Leader of the Opposition, "Back me or sack me", and the right hon. Gentleman succeeded in doing both.

Mr. Paddy Ashdown (Yeovil): I hate to change the subject, but is the Prime Minister aware that more than 300,000 pensioners whose incomes are too low for them to pay tax are still waiting for the Treasury to decide whether, as promised, there will be a rethink on the Budget decision to remove from them a tax refund worth on average £75 to each of them? Is the Paymaster General still dealing with the matter?

The Prime Minister: No. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has already made it clear that we shall let those pensioners know as soon as a decision has been reached, but a whole series of issues has to be decided alongside that and we shall deal with the matter as soon as we possibly can.

Mr. Ashdown: I am surprised to hear the Prime Minister say that, as I have a letter from the Treasury less than two months old indicating that the Paymaster General is still dealing with the matter. Indeed, six months ago the Paymaster General himself promised that it would be dealt with "as soon as possible". Is it not clear that there is confusion over the matter and that the price of the Prime Minister's desire to preserve a lame-duck Minister is now being paid out of some of the poorest pockets in the land? For their sake if for no other, is it not now time to resolve the matter?

The Prime Minister: We shall make the decision as soon as we possibly can. We have said that and we shall keep to it.

Miss Anne Begg (Aberdeen, South): As a young person struggling to walk, I had cause to be grateful to the Motability scheme for supplying me with a car, which transformed my life. Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating the previous Labour Government, and Alf Morris in particular, on introducing the Motability scheme and Motability, which will hand over its millionth car this week? Can he assure me that the present Labour Government will continue to pursue policies that will make it easier for disabled people to play a full part in society?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to participate in the events surrounding the 21st anniversary of Motability. I am happy to pay tribute to the previous Labour Government, and Lord Morris in particular. As my hon. Friend will know, the extra money provided under the new deal to help disabled people to work—almost £200 million—will be well used. The disability rights commission, on which we intend to legislate in the coming Session, will also make sure that the barriers to disabled people playing a full part in society are removed.

Q2. [61590] **Mr. Richard Page** (South-West Hertfordshire): The Prime Minister will be aware of the distress and hurt felt by Maxwell pensioners, hundreds of whom live in my constituency, when they learned that

Robert Maxwell had stolen their pension funds. As more of Robert Maxwell's activities are revealed—and bearing in mind that he was a former Labour Member and an enthusiastic Labour supporter—can the Prime Minister assure the House that all the Administration have clean hands as regards dealing with that crook?

The Prime Minister: Yes, and if the hon. Gentleman has any evidence to the contrary, he should supply it.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, as people await the decision of the Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee, it is worth reflecting on the difference that the independence of that body has made and comparing the present position with that of 10 years ago, at the same point in the economic cycle, when there were 1 million more people unemployed than today, when inflation was twice what it is today, when interest rates were 13 per cent. and when we had a Tory Government?

The Prime Minister: We are, of course, hitting the inflation target, and long-term interest rates are at their lowest level for more than 30 years. The reason why we are able to achieve that is that we have in place Bank of England independence and proper controls on spending that allow us to keep public finances under control and put an extra £40 billion into our schools and hospitals. As the deputy leader of the Conservative party repeated just a few days ago, the Conservatives are against Bank of England independence, and we know that they are against our spending proposals. We are in a better position this economic cycle precisely because we have pursued the policies that they oppose.

Q4. [61592] **Mr. Edward Garnier** (Harborough): Can the Prime Minister give me three good reasons why the Paymaster General should remain in office?

The Prime Minister: I have always said, first, that anybody who is guilty of serious wrongdoing will be dismissed. I have secondly, however, made it clear that I will always, with any Minister, go on the basis of evidence, not on the basis of what the media say or what the Conservative Opposition say.

Q5. [61593] **Angela Smith** (Basildon): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the independent panel for special educational needs has branded Essex county council one of the worst in the country for supporting pupils with special needs? Is he further aware that one of the worst problems that that causes is delays in assessment which mean that children cannot reach their full potential? Can he assure the House that the Government will provide that all children, especially the most vulnerable—even those in the Tory-led Essex county council area—will be given full support by the Government to help them reach their potential? What action can he take to ensure that Essex county council fulfils its obligations?

The Prime Minister: The Government expect all local authorities to meet the needs of young people with special educational needs. We have given Essex county council an extra £29 million for education—an increase of almost 6 per cent. The Government have launched a £60 million action plan for pupils with special educational needs—a doubling of the central funding available. There is no reason at all why the needs of those children should not be properly looked after. I stress to my hon. Friend that it is an investment when we pay that money over to councils and they use it properly. Those children have abilities and, if we give them the right support, those abilities can flourish. I expect and hope that all councils will follow the Government's lead.

Q6. [61594] **Mr. Malcolm Moss** (North-East Cambridgeshire): Does the Prime Minister have any regrets about the clumsy and arrogant way in which his Government lectured Oskar Lafontaine, the German Finance Minister, about how best he might present European tax plans? Does he realise that that will not be allowed to hide the truth from the British people—that what our European partners really intend is tax rises for this country?

The Prime Minister: The only way in which we shall get a serious debate on this issue is on the basis of fact. I have read out to the hon. Gentleman a list of leaders of other European countries who have made it clear that they do not support increasing taxes across Europe. On the contrary, they want to get taxes down. The hon. Gentleman has to come to terms with the psychology of the Conservative party today. Every time there is a problem in Europe or someone makes a remark in Europe, the Conservatives are desperate to use that as an excuse for their policy. It is not in the British national interest to adopt that attitude. It is in the British national interest to make sure that we win arguments in Europe, not use arguments as an excuse for turning our back on Europe.

Mrs. Rosemary McKenna (Cumbernauld and Kilsyth): Yesterday I visited the showroom of the Scottish Apparel Group here in London. I was told by the managing director of Traditional Weatherwear, manufacturers of high-quality waterproof clothing in my constituency, that the company had increased turnover by 30 per cent. and exports by 40 per cent. in the past six months. It has taken on 12 apprentices. Will not the attitude of the Opposition in talking down the economy damage the prospects of those young people and of hard-working manufacturers throughout the country?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate the company to which my hon. Friend refers. The best way of dealing with whatever economic difficulties we face over the next year is to hold firm to the key policies that the Government set out: proper Bank of England independence, proper rules on public spending, extra investment in our future—particularly in education, skills and apprenticeships, as she rightly says—and making sure through the new deal and the working families tax credit that people have incentives to work. That is the best policy to weather any storm that comes.

Q7. [61595] **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): Since 1985, Britain has saved tens of billions of pounds thanks to the hard-won rebate from the European Union. Under the previous Government, the EU rebate was not negotiable. Is the EU rebate still not negotiable, and how long will it remain so under this Government?

The Prime Minister: Even in France—to deal with the point that was made earlier—I made it quite clear that

the British rebate will stay. It will stay because it is right and because, even after we take account of all the changes in Europe over the past few years, we are a net contributor above countries with higher incomes than ours. That is why it is right. I do not doubt that all sorts of other countries in Europe will put all sorts of things on the table and raise all sorts of issues. We shall raise some of our own issues as well, but I repeat that the best way to get the result that we want is to stay engaged in the debate, not to walk away from it.

Q8. [61596] **Ms Claire Ward** (Watford): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, in the first decade of the new millennium, for the first time in our history, the over-60s will begin to outnumber the under-18s? Does he agree that that will require a new policy approach to matters such as health, welfare, housing and work? Does he welcome the debate of the age campaign, which is holding an exhibition in the Upper Waiting Hall of the House and which will raise public awareness of that demographic shift and ensure that we start to make plans for the future?

The Prime Minister: I welcome Age Concern's debate of the age—indeed, I have participated in it. It is excellent that we are looking at how the senior citizens of this country can play a part in all the various work of this country. As my hon. Friend will know, I make particular reference not only to the additional money that we are giving to the poorest pensioners, but to the free eye tests, concessionary travel and winter fuel payments that help some of the elderly. However, the importance of the debate of the age is that it can enable us to get the very best from senior citizens, who have an immense amount to contribute to this country, if they are given the chance to do so.

Independent Nuclear Deterrent

Q9. [61597] **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If it is his policy to maintain an independent nuclear deterrent until it is possible to verify the permanent abolition of all other countries' mass destruction weapons.

The Prime Minister: We made it clear in the strategic defence review that, while large nuclear arsenals and the risk of proliferation exist, our minimum deterrent will remain a necessary element of our security.

Dr. Lewis: May I congratulate the Prime Minister on his belated conversion to the cause of nuclear deterrence, now that the danger has largely receded? Does he recall that, on a previous occasion when I asked him a question, he evaded it by referring back 20 years, to my past membership of an extremely dodgy organisation—the Labour party—in the 1970s? Will he now clear up a mystery about his membership of an even more dodgy organisation in the 1980s? Will he tell the House, once and for all, why, at the height of the cold war, he belonged to the Campaign for—unilateral—Nuclear Disarmament; when he finally decided to leave it; and why, as recently as 1994, he allowed his office repeatedly and wrongly to deny that he had ever even been a member of it?

The Prime Minister: We can see why they are such an effective Opposition. I thank the hon. Gentleman for his congratulations to me, but all I can say is that my congratulations go to the Labour party for having had the sense to get rid of him.

Engagements

Q10. [61598] **Mr. David Borrow** (South Ribble): Has my right hon. Friend had an opportunity to read the report of the Trade and Industry Committee on car prices paid in the United Kingdom, which are excessive compared with those in the rest of the European Union? Will he assure me that he will take every opportunity to ensure that UK car purchasers will no longer be ripped off and that they will pay the same price as purchasers in the rest of the EU?

The Prime Minister: The Government welcome the Trade and Industry Committee's report. We are particularly interested in its proposals that would enable car buyers in this country to have access to lower prices such as those currently available on the continent. Under the new Competition Act 1998, there will be financial penalties of up to 10 per cent. of UK turnover for firms that infringe the prohibitions. I am confident that those new powers will be effective. I believe that, with the new powers in the Competition Act, we shall be able to take action in the interests of Britain's consumers.

Mr. Dafydd Wigley (Caernarfon): Is the Prime Minister aware of the anger and dismay felt in Wales at the way in which he and his colleagues are trying to place a centralist straitjacket on almost every aspect of the National Assembly for Wales? If the membership, leadership and policies of the National Assembly are subject to a London veto, what on earth is the point of setting it up in the first place?

The Prime Minister: First of all, they are not. Secondly, the right hon. Gentleman has been campaigning for years and years for an Assembly in Wales. We give him an Assembly in Wales, and he still complains. It will be for the people of Wales to decide which party should run the Assembly in Wales. However, given the extra support that we are managing to give schools and hospitals and given what we can do for jobs and industry in Wales, I believe that the Welsh people will back us. It would be good once in a while to get a bit of gratitude from the right hon. Gentleman for having delivered what he has wanted for so very long.

Chechnya

3.31 pm

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford) (*by private notice*): To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the tragic killings of three Britons yesterday in Chechnya.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Tony Lloyd): It is my sad duty to inform the House that Russian Interior Minister Stepashin confirmed to our ambassador in Moscow last night that, as we had feared, the remains found in Chechnya on 8 December were those of Darren Hickey, Peter Kennedy, Rudolf Petschi and Stanley Shaw, the four kidnap victims abducted in Grozny on 3 October. Three of the victims were British nationals and one was from New Zealand. We express our condolences to all the families and to the New Zealand Government.

We are deeply saddened and angered by these barbaric and senseless murders. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary this morning met Russian Foreign Minister Ivanov, who passed on the condolences of the Russian Government. During that meeting, the Foreign Secretary asked Foreign Minister Ivanov to speak directly with President Maskhadov, the Chechen President, so that we can find out exactly what happened to the hostages and ensure that the perpetrators of that wicked crime are pursued and brought to justice.

The victims were innocent people who were working to help to rebuild Chechnya's war-ravaged infrastructure. Our first thoughts must be for the families of the victims. We can only begin to imagine the anguish that they must be suffering at this devastating news. The Foreign Office, the police and the victims' employers are in close contact with the families to provide whatever help and advice they can at this most traumatic time. My noble Friend Baroness Symons, who has responsibility for consular affairs in the Foreign Office, will speak to the families later today. We are also in close contact with the New Zealand Government, who share our grief at this appalling act, and with the employers of the victims, whom I met at the Foreign Office earlier today.

The precise details of the incidents leading up to the tragic murders remain unclear. It seems likely that the victims were killed as a consequence of fighting between rival Chechen forces. However, I would not wish to, and cannot, speculate any further until the facts are known properly. I believe that it is right that the families of the victims should be the first to know, as soon as we are able to establish, what happened. I assure the House that every effort is being made to get to the truth.

The unstable and confused situation in Chechnya will not make that task easy. The Russian authorities admit that their writ does not run into Chechnya and the Chechen authorities are not in control of the situation. Chechnya remains extremely unsafe for British officials and it would be irresponsible to endanger any more British lives by sending our officials to that area. However, we are working closely with the Russian authorities through our embassy in Moscow and through high-level contacts with senior members of the Russian Government. Our ambassador in Moscow met Russian Interior Minister Stepashin earlier today.

Since the kidnapping took place, the Foreign Office has been active in seeking the release of the hostages. We sought to make progress particularly through our contacts with both the Russian and Chechen authorities. We have also kept in close touch with the company and the families. Granger Telecom took the lead on the ground in accordance with the wishes of the families and in recognition of its strong links, through commercial contacts, in Chechnya. In the light of these tragic and brutal murders, we shall still co-operate with all concerned, but our first priority is to have the remains of the deceased returned to their families.

We have made it clear that we need to know what happened and what is being done to bring to justice those who committed these repugnant murders. The Government will not rest until the perpetrators of this monstrous crime have been punished.

In conclusion, it is right and proper that I should repeat the FCO's earlier pleas to all British companies, non-governmental organisations and individuals not to go to Chechnya. It is not safe. The British, Russian and Chechen authorities cannot guarantee the safety of foreigners. British citizens should not go there under any circumstances.

Mr. Keetch: I thank the Minister and Prime Minister for sending their condolences to the families, and I am sure that the whole House will join them in that. It is the families' urgent wish that the hostages' remains should be returned as soon as possible for Christian burial. I support the Minister's efforts to achieve that through the Russian Government and the Chechen authorities.

Now that the Chechen authorities have today confirmed that the killings were part of a bungled rescue attempt, will the Minister assure the House that at no stage in the future will he support the sending of British nationals to Chechnya? Does he agree that any company wishing to send its employees to such a troubled zone should be dissuaded from doing so?

Is the Minister aware that Granger Telecom, the employer of the deceased, has said that it received unclear advice from the Foreign Office? Will he tell the House what that advice was and assure us that the advice was given to the employees? Will he also tell the House what security was provided for the employees while they were in Chechnya? Will he again stress that no British citizen should go to that God-forsaken country?

Mr. Lloyd: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I am sure that all hon. Members would want to convey their condolences to the families.

The advice that the Foreign Office has given consistently to all concerned, including Granger Telecom, is clear and unambiguous. It is simply that to operate in Chechnya is to put British lives at risk and that British citizens should not travel in that region. Tragically, these events bear out the wisdom of that advice.

We do not know the exact details of the circumstances in which the lives were taken. We know of rumours but, unfortunately, rumours abound in Chechnya. We had no notice of any attempt to rescue the hostages and we would not have advised such an attempt, given the danger that

[Mr. Lloyd]

would inevitably be involved. Our priority was always the safety of the four individuals. Our advice, which is still consistent, is that no Briton should travel to that region.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): On behalf of Mrs. Lilly Shaw, I too thank the Minister for his expression of sympathy and thank the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for taking the lead in the case of Mr. Stanley Shaw, who, although a constituent of mine, is a citizen of New Zealand.

This is not a time for recrimination or blame. Granger Telecom is based in my constituency and I ask the Minister to acknowledge the active, key role taken by the company over the past couple of months in seeking to secure the hostages' release.

Will the Minister confirm that the advice to which he referred, which was given to the company, principally consisted of drawing the company's attention to the published advice to travellers? As of today, that advice lists 16 countries, including Sudan, Algeria and Sri Lanka, to which travellers are advised not to travel under any circumstances. British companies are doing business in many of those countries. Has the Minister reviewed all the internal correspondence at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and all the records of conversations between his Department and the company? Is he absolutely sure that the company was sent an unambiguous message from the British Government about its presence in Chechnya? I have visited the company since the tragic events took place, and I formed the impression that the message sent from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office was not in totality as unambiguous as the Minister would have the House believe.

Mr. Lloyd: I associate myself with the hon. Gentleman's message to his constituents and their family.

I stick by the information that I have given the hon. Gentleman previously. The advice was unambiguous. I must point out that Granger Telecom met Foreign Office officials directly and did not come to talk about other countries such as Sudan. I do not want to get into a slanging match across the Dispatch Box, but I repeat that I am absolutely of the view that the advice given was specific and could not have been misinterpreted.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): On behalf of the Opposition, I join the Minister in expressing anger and outrage at the brutal, cold-blooded murders of Darren Hickey, Peter Kennedy, Rudolf Petschi, and Stanley Shaw. I agree with the Minister that the House's thoughts and sympathy must go first and foremost to their families who are having to come to terms with these senseless killings in the war-torn region that the men were helping to rebuild.

I thank the Minister for the details that he has given of the discussions that his Department is having with the authorities in Moscow, but will he give us a better idea of what British resources he expects to put at the Russian authorities's disposal to establish who was responsible for this atrocity? Will he also tell us, perhaps in an effort to clarify what was known by the Foreign Office, when he knew that there were separate negotiations over the release of these men, and whether the Foreign Office was consulted about them?

Will the Minister confirm reports that the company advising on negotiations with the kidnappers was Control Risks and say whether he had any contact with that company? Will he further confirm, as my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) asked him to, that his Department really did provide clear and unambiguous advice to Granger Telecom and that the Department of Trade and Industry was also providing advice to companies operating in Chechnya? If so, could copies of that advice be made available?

Will the Minister say how, in the advice that he gives to companies, he distinguishes between countries that are dangerous and countries that are potentially lethal? Are there any other British or Commonwealth citizens in the Chechen Republic? If so, what advice have they been given, and are there any plans to help them leave the republic safely? Will he comment on reports that 10 people are still being held in captivity in Chechnya?

Finally, in the light of these tragic deaths, what lessons can be learned? Will the Minister be changing the Foreign Office procedures for informing companies about the dangers of operating in hostile regions?

Mr. Lloyd: Let me say once again as forcefully as I can that I have absolutely no doubt that the advice given was unambiguous and clear and could lead only to the conclusion that Chechnya was too dangerous a place in which to operate and that British citizens should not have been there. There is no question of reviewing the nature of that advice. It is already very clear and still stands for anyone who seeks our advice and, indeed, for anyone who ignores it.

We are aware of, I think, two other British citizens still in Chechnya. Our advice to them and those working with them has again been clear and direct, especially in the light of the taking of the hostages. Our advice to that organisation was clear and continues to be clear.

On resources offered to the Russians, I repeat that it is a matter of practical reality that the writ of the Russian authorities does not easily run in Chechnya. That is why my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary asked Foreign Minister Ivanov to communicate with Chechen President Maskhadov in order that the Chechen authorities should begin to pursue the question of what happened and to bring those responsible for it to justice. We shall seek to bring our influence to bear at that level.

The British Government's position on the question of hostages and ransom demands has always been very clear. We do not pay ransoms. The Government confirmed that policy, which obtained under the previous Government, at an early stage. In the interests of British citizens, that is right. Nor do we advise others to pay ransom. As a Government, we were not involved in any negotiations.

Granger Telecom communicated with those responsible for taking the hostages and has been active in seeking the release of such hostages. As the issue must initially be one for the company, I am not in a position to provide any details of the process of those negotiations. At this stage, it is right and proper that information should be made available to the families before it comes into the public domain. The company has agreed with me that the families are entitled to the utmost frankness in the provision of whatever information they need to cope with their almost insupportable loss.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): May I thank the Minister for his condolences to Rudi Petschi and his family, who lived in my constituency? The Minister said that he will investigate the matter. These callous and tragic deaths deserve a thorough investigation that will assist us should we ever need to go through anything similar again.

I draw the Minister's attention to a specific piece of information which deserves scrutiny. He said that the Foreign Office had no warning that an attempt was to be made to rescue the hostages. I know how difficult it is to unscramble messages about what happened. However, yesterday, the Russian section of the BBC monitoring service in Caversham supplied me with a statement that it released at 0615 hours on Sunday from the head of the Chechen security services, which identifies that they knew where the hostages were—in a hamlet on Russian soil close to the Chechen border—and anticipated that Russian forces were likely to mount a rescue. Clearly, that needs to be investigated. Given that that information was in the public domain at 6.15 am on Sunday, will the Minister investigate why the Foreign Office did not know about the threat until the news broke yesterday?

Mr. Lloyd: I thank the hon. Lady, too, for her opening remarks. I recognise that for her, as for others with a constituency interest, this is a difficult time. The four Members of Parliament who are most directly involved saw me some weeks ago precisely because they wanted to express their concern.

The hon. Lady must accept that Chechnya is a region where there is almost daily rumour, claim and counterclaim. Rather sadly, there is nothing unusual about the report that she read out. Such a report does not necessarily lead immediately to any practical action. I am aware of such statements, and certainly undertake to get to the bottom of the matter in order to piece together a proper picture of what happened and to see whether there are lessons to be learned.

In the context of the Chechnya of today, we are not dealing with a state organised in the way that we would expect elsewhere. We are dealing with a situation where banditry is the rule of law; unfortunately, our citizens were murdered by precisely that banditry.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): The Minister will be aware that the parents of Darren Hickey work and live in my constituency, and I am grateful to the Minister for his condolences, which I obviously share. The Hickeys have been through a very difficult time, as have the families of the other hostages, and no news was easily available. I appreciate the fact that the Minister explained the difficulty that our embassy in Moscow has in contacting people in Chechnya.

First, will the Minister—without again going into the details of what form of notice might have been given to the company—accept that the contract was a very substantial contract to a very serious company, Granger Telecom, which it was carrying out in association with a BT engineer; and that, therefore, the Government must have at least been aware of its significance, in the middle of Chechnya, bearing in mind its situation vis-a-vis Russia?

Secondly, was any guidance or advice given to the Chechen authorities as they started their search for these four people? Were any military offers of assistance given in terms of advice? It would not be the first time that that had happened, but it is something that it would be good for the House—and for the parents—to understand.

Finally, is there any way that we can achieve better communications with Chechnya? What is the current situation with Russia? What lessons do we need to learn? Some other parts of the former Soviet Union are in considerable disarray; I believe that the Foreign Office must now clarify its guidance to workers on key contracts won by British companies, if there is any thought that those workers might be at risk elsewhere in that region.

Mr. Lloyd: While I recognise the importance of the contract for those companies involved, I must again repeat the clear, unambiguous advice offered by the Foreign Office—that British citizens should not operate in that area. In the end, as a Government of a free society, we have no power to compel our citizens, beyond offering such advice. Clearly, I have taken the opportunity, and will take the opportunity, to repeat to all concerned that Chechnya is a dangerous place; British citizens simply should not be there. However, I would also tell the House that it was not simply a matter of the exchange of notes. Granger Telecom did meet Foreign Office officials, who gave that advice in those very clear terms. There is no ambiguity in all this. I believe that I have now said that a significant number of times, and I hope that the House will accept that.

The hon. Gentleman asked about our relations with the Chechen authorities. No, we did not offer any military support. We had no easy way on the ground of knowing where the four hostages were. The flow of information was almost non-existent; in those circumstances, our advice would have availed but little.

Obviously, in any situation, we shall always consider the best way of releasing our citizens, and different circumstances may well offer different possibilities. However, in this specific case, a British military intervention would have been extremely dangerous, and would have placed further British lives at risk. Moreover, I do not believe that I could have guaranteed that the result would have been what those advocating that course sought.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): This is a dreadful crime. It puts one in mind of the hostage-taking that took place in the middle east a decade or so ago. Does the Minister agree—he has said so, really—that hostage-taking is encouraged by the payment of ransoms? Will he therefore accept our very strong support for his statement that no ransoms should be paid; and will he accept that the British Government will never be party to the payment of ransoms? Will he do his utmost to encourage Governments of other countries to adopt the same policy, and will he do his best to discourage all parties from even considering the payment of ransoms?

Mr. Lloyd: I am genuinely grateful for that intervention because it raises a matter of the utmost importance, which is that there is no advantage in a system where hostages are taken and ransom is systematically paid. That simply encourages the taking of hostages. All experience throughout the world demonstrates the proof of that. The continuation of a policy that makes it clear to all the parties that, as a Government, we will not pay or sanction the payment of

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ransoms is important, and it is important that it be clear and understood. Yes, of course, we seek, and will continue to seek, the co operation of other Governments in pursuing exactly that same policy.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): I am sure that the whole House is grateful to the Minister for the sensitive and sombre way in which he has been answering questions. Would he join me in urging right hon. and hon. Members to have some sympathy for the position in which the leadership in Chechnya finds itself? It is under threat from Chechen bandits, Muslim fundamentalists and the Russians, whose terrible bombardment of their country led to the chaos that is there. Will the Minister agree with me that it is understandable that the leadership in Chechnya is desperate to have help from the west to rebuild the country, and that we should pay tribute to those men who were brave enough to try to help it?

Mr. Lloyd: There is no doubt that the hon. Gentleman's comments about the difficulties facing the ordinary citizen of Chechnya and the Chechen Government have much merit. The situation of the Chechen Government is indeed far from normal governance.

We would draw strongly to the attention of the Chechen authorities the fact that, if they want assistance in the reconstruction of their country, it is vital that such horrific murders be brought to a conclusion by the successful arrest and prosecution of those concerned. Without that, countries like Britain, and Britain itself, will not be confident that the situation in Chechnya will ever be one where we are able practically to assist.

Point of Order

3.57 pm

Mr. Ted Rowlands (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I apologise for bothering you, but may I seek your advice on the position of Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland Members which arises from an interesting memorandum submitted by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, entitled "Procedural Consequences of Devolution"? Paragraph 5 states:

> "To assist the House to become more familiar with matters which will no longer be the responsibility of the relevant Secretaries of State, it is proposed that from the start of the 1998-99 Session Ministers will, where practical, indicate in their answers to questions and in debate when they are dealing with subjects they will not be responsible for after devolution."

I make no complaint, but I understand that this advice was not followed in Scottish questions yesterday or in Welsh questions today. I wondered whether, through you, Madam Speaker, we might find a way forward. I think that many Members who will be affected by these issues would like the recommendation to be acted on. I wondered whether, through you, I might find a means of encouraging Ministers to follow my right hon. Friend's recommendation.

Madam Speaker: I think that the point of order will be noted by those on the Treasury Bench, which will perhaps go some way to helping the hon. Gentleman with his query. I am sure he knows that it is entirely a matter for Ministers how they answer questions. Responses to questions have nothing to do with me. He might consider tabling a question to the President of the Council on this matter. At least that would draw the matter to the attention of the Leader of the House and the whole House, so that Members can read the document for themselves.

Opposition Day

[1ST ALLOTTED DAY]

Decommissioning and Prisoner Releases

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the Prime Minister.

3.59 pm

Mr. Andrew MacKay (Bracknell): I beg to move,

That this House supports the Belfast Agreement and reasserts that the Agreement has to be implemented in all its parts; believes that several things must happen in parallel in order to build confidence, whether it be decommissioning or the release of prisoners; notes that the only organisations that can qualify to take seats in the government of Northern Ireland and can expect the early release of prisoners are those that have given up violence for good and that decommissioning is part of that; notes that since July over 200 terrorist prisoners have been released early while decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives has yet to begin; and believes that there should be no further early releases of prisoners, and no place in the Northern Ireland Executive for their representatives in the Assembly, until there has been substantial and verifiable decommissioning.

It is worth saying that, seven months after the signing of the historic Belfast agreement on Good Friday, it is right and proper that the House of Commons should review the progress of the agreement. This is an excellent opportunity to do so. It is clear that there is grave concern in our constituencies and in the Province about the lack of decommissioning of illegally held weapons and the fact that so many terrorist prisoners have been released early. Therefore, it is appropriate that the Opposition, on the first Supply day of the new Session, have tabled this motion.

To pre-empt any intervention by Government Back Benchers, I wish to say that we fully recognise the huge advantages gained from a bipartisan policy on Northern Ireland wherever possible. By and large, we benefited from that bipartisan policy when we were in government, but noted that, on occasions—especially each year when we sought to renew the emergency provisions legislation—we failed to gain the support of the Opposition.

Wherever possible, we support the Government in the bipartisan policy, but I have always maintained clearly to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that I cannot give them a blank cheque, and nor should I. It is our constitutional duty as the Opposition to speak out when we believe that the Government are doing something wrong, and to question further when answers are not satisfactory. That we have done, will do again this afternoon, and will continue to do.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I rise to intervene with some diffidence, given the right hon. Gentleman's comments about interventions by Government Back Benchers. Does he agree with the assessment by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State that the IRA, the Ulster Defence Association and the Ulster Volunteer Force are maintaining a complete ceasefire, or does he hold a different view?

Mr. MacKay: I will answer that point directly. The Secretary of State has the benefit of the best security advice available, and it is that those organisations are maintaining a ceasefire. I accept that, but later in my remarks I shall make the point that renunciation of violence must include—as the Prime Minister and Secretary of State have said continually—the decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives.

The hon. Gentleman takes a great interest in these affairs, and I am sure that he agrees that, although large-scale violence is not taking place, intimidation and so-called punishment beatings are still occurring in the Province. That is very serious, and the Secretary of State has said that, if any evidence could be passed to her, the security services and especially the Royal Ulster Constabulary would pursue it. The hon. Gentleman cannot comfortably accept that there is a total ceasefire in all forms when such intimidation takes place on certain estates on both sides of the sectarian divide.'

My party supports the Belfast agreement, because it is the extension of a process that was started by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) and Lord Mayhew during the previous Administration. It has been continued by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland and the Prime Minister, and has led to the signing of the agreement. Without repeating what I said at the time of the agreement, I believe that it represents the best chance and opportunity for lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

Mr. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Hall Green): The right hon. Gentleman says that he supports the Belfast agreement, but the motion tries to create a link between prisoners and decommissioning that does not exist in the agreement. Is not the effect of the motion to undermine the agreement, even if that is not his intention?

Mr. MacKay: The hon. Gentleman should take a bit more note of what the Secretary of State has said from the Dispatch Box. In answer to questions from me during Northern Ireland questions in October, she rightly said that prisoner release and decommissioning should go in parallel. In answer to questions from Opposition Members on 2 December, she said:

"Let me make our position absolutely clear: decommissioning is an integral part of the agreement; it is not a precondition but an obligation."—[*Official Report*, 2 December 1998; Vol. 321, c. 867.]

She is absolutely right. I support her in that respect. I wish that the hon. Gentleman had done the same.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): The issue of linkage is fundamental, as I am sure that my right hon. Friend will agree. Was not one of the Mitchell principles that no one was allowed to take part in the peace discussions unless they had forsworn violence for good? Yet we know that, since the Good Friday agreement and beforehand, many paramilitary groups, particularly the IRA, have been involved in many beatings and, in the case of the IRA, the murder of a man called Andrew Kearney in Belfast. Is not that the linkage? It has been linkage throughout, yet some now try to deny it.

Mr. MacKay: My hon. Friend makes a good point. I underline that point by quoting the Prime Minister at the

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Dispatch Box in response to a question from my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. On 6 May, he said:

"Again, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is essential that organisations that want to benefit from the early release of prisoners should give up violence. Decommissioning is part of that, of course".—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1998; Vol. 311, c. 711.]

I entirely agree with the Prime Minister. The renunciation of violence itself is not enough without decommissioning.

Mr. John Gunnell (Morley and Rothwell): It is right for the right hon. Gentleman to seek a debate on an issue on which there is some debate to be had, but does he intend to put the matter to the vote? It seems unreasonable to put on public record a division of this sort—something which we did not do in opposition. That could be harmful to the agreement. I ask the right hon. Gentleman to think seriously about that. I would be unhappy if I had to vote on the matter.

Mr. MacKay: I can answer the hon. Gentleman clearly. We had expected, hoped and assumed that our motion would not need a vote, but would be passed by the House. As we now see an amendment on the Order Paper, I suspect, Madam Speaker, that you might well be calling a Division at about 7 o'clock.

The hon. Gentleman said that we should not have votes on matters concerning Northern Ireland. I wish that he and his colleagues had taken that advice when, year in and year out, they ratted on emergency provisions and prevention of terrorism legislation, when bombs were going off here on the mainland and in Northern Ireland, murdering innocent people. At best they abstained, and at worst they voted against such legislation. They were soft on terrorism. I am glad that they have now changed. I had not intended to raise this. They have chosen to do so. The facts and the votes recorded in *Hansard* speak for themselves.

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): The right hon. Gentleman seems to want it both ways on bipartisanship, and now he seems to have an a la carte approach to the Belfast agreement. He knows perfectly well that the whole House, and certainly my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, are completely committed to the whole agreement, including decommissioning, so why on earth does he even contemplate voting against the Government on the issue, knowing what message that will convey on the island of Ireland?

Mr. MacKay: With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, let me say that the simple truth is that the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State have always been right to say that the Belfast agreement cannot be cherry-picked. I am not cherry-picking; the paramilitaries are cherry-picking. We are backing the Belfast agreement, and anyone who does so should support our motion. As I deploy my arguments, the hon. Gentleman will see why.

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacKay: This will be the last time for a while. No one else will be called to speak in the debate if we continue like this.

Mr. Thomas: How many paramilitary weapons did the right hon. Gentleman's party manage to get decommissioned? How many Opposition Supply day debates did we initiate on that subject? Does he not recognise that proper implementation of the Good Friday agreement—not attempting to rewrite it, as his party is seeking to do—is the best way to secure decommissioning?

Mr. MacKay: That has confirmed my worst fears. That pathetic and irrelevant intervention is not fit for a response.

At the time of the Belfast agreement, we were deeply uncomfortable about the early release of terrorist prisoners, as were the great majority of decent, law-abiding people in this country.

Mr. Brian White (Milton Keynes, North–East): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacKay: I shall proceed a little.

With the greatest reluctance, we swallowed our concerns, because we realised that early releases were part of a wider package. As the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister said at the time, it was not to be cherry-picked, and had to be seen in the round—complete.

It is absolutely clear under the Good Friday agreement that paramilitaries whose political associates had signed the agreement would decommission all their illegally held arms and explosives over two years, and, at the same time, the Government—starting when the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 became law in July—would release terrorist prisoners early, providing that the Secretary of State was satisfied that they were not likely to return to violence or associate with other paramilitaries.

What has happened? The Government—I do not quibble with this, as the Secretary of State knows—have released a number of terrorist prisoners early, to show good faith and that they were keeping their part of the Belfast agreement bargain. Seven months on, not one gun or ounce of Semtex has been handed in, but more than 200 terrorist prisoners have been released early. To say the least, that is hugely disproportionate.

Any reasonable person looking at the scene in Northern Ireland would say that, seven months on—more than a quarter of the way through the two-year decommissioning period—some weapons should have been handed in. After a mere three months of the two-year period for early release of terrorist prisoners, half have already been released.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Has the right hon. Gentleman considered whether his speech will give more aid and comfort to those who voted for the agreement or to those who voted against?

Mr. MacKay: The best aid and comfort that I can give to those who voted yes—I campaigned for a yes vote, along with the Secretary of State—is to make sure that the Prime Minister's pledges at the Balmoral agricultural show, and subsequently at the university of Ulster at Coleraine, are met. Having returned from the Province within the past few hours, I can tell the hon. Lady that a large number of people who voted yes feel deeply disillusioned and let down by the Prime Minister, because

they believe that pledges that he gave in the referendum campaign and from the Dispatch Box to the House of Commons have not yet been met.

Mr. Stephen Day (Cheadle): Is my right hon. Friend aware that members of the public, not only in Northern Ireland but throughout the United Kingdom, are appalled and cannot understand the logic of continuing to release terrorists without the decommissioning of arms? They are bemused and puzzled. Many of my constituents have written to me about this issue, and are delighted that my right hon. Friend has had the courage to face reality.

Mr. MacKay: I agree with my hon. Friend that any reasonable person would be perplexed, confused and disappointed that, seven months on, no guns or Semtex have been handed in, yet well over 200 terrorist prisoners have been released early. That is grossly disproportionate, and it calls into question whether any decommissioning will take place.

Mr. White: Is it not true that, when the previous ceasefire took place, the Conservative Government released more prisoners? Prisoners were released when violent acts were still being carried out, whereas now there is no violence.

Mr. MacKay: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. Labour Members, including the hon. Gentleman, have a very limited memory of what happened in the previous Parliament. We increased remission to 50 per cent. to bring Northern Ireland law into line with that in the rest of the United Kingdom. That did not involve decommissioning, and it did not entail the two-thirds remission that is now in prospect. Under the agreement, every terrorist prisoner will be released within two years. The two situations are not comparable, so I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has misled the House.

It is worth while quoting the then Secretary of State during the Second Reading debate on 30 October 1995. He said:

"The House will be reassured to know, however, that many of those who have been sentenced for the most heinous offences would under the provisions of the Bill remain in prison until at least the end of the first decade in the next century."—[*Official Report*, 30 October 1995; Vol. 265, c. 26.]

That is not happening now. I do not quibble with that, but to make such comparisons is ill advised and a mistake.

Mr. Robert McCartney (North Down): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that no comparison can be made, because many of the most serious criminals being released under the current scheme have been charged with murder and sentenced to life, whereas, under the previous arrangements, there was no remission for those sentenced to life imprisonment?

Mr. MacKay: The hon. and learned Gentleman, with his considerable professional experience, is entirely right, and I concur with everything he says.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire) *rose—*

Mr. MacKay: I shall allow one last intervention, as the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) represents the Liberal Democrats on these matters.

Mr. Öpik: Perhaps I can get the right hon. Gentleman back to his speech. Will he clarify an important point? He said that many people in Northern Ireland were turning away from their decision to support the agreement. Will he confirm unequivocally that the Conservative party remains absolutely committed to the spirit and to the letter of the Good Friday agreement?

Mr. MacKay: I am happy to confirm that, as I said at the beginning of my speech. The best way to reassure the doubters who voted yes but are now uncertain and disillusioned is to ensure that decommissioning takes place, and that the proposal in our motion is implemented. An increased number of people would then support the agreement, instead of being disillusioned.

It would be remiss of me not to touch briefly on two other points. First, I congratulate the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble), the First Minister of the Northern Ireland Assembly, who this week collects his Nobel prize in Norway. He is absolutely right to say that he cannot, should not and will not appoint Sinn Fein Ministers to the Executive until substantial and verifiable decommissioning takes place.

I hope that hon. Members throughout the House will agree that it is not possible to be a Minister in any part of the United Kingdom—in any free and democratic society—and run a Department and a country, or a province, while maintaining a fully armed private army. That is incompatible with democracy, and should be denounced from the House of Commons. The right hon. Member for Upper Bann will have our full support in not appointing Sinn Fein members as Ministers until there is substantial and verifiable decommissioning.

My second point is not entirely connected with the motion, so I hope that you will bear with me, Madam Speaker. There has been further discussion in Downing street today about north-south bodies, and we naturally welcome that. I believe that resolution of the discussions on north-south bodies may well take some time, but that is not necessarily a problem: tough, hard bargaining is going on, and for my part I wish it to be left to the parties in Northern Ireland to resolve the problems. I believe that they will resolve those problems satisfactorily, but I am not so certain that the decommissioning issue will be resolved.

It will not be a lack of resolution on north-south bodies and the setting up of institutions that brings down the process. I expect that to be achieved, albeit, perhaps, over longer than the next few days. What I fear is that, without decommissioning of weapons illegally held by the paramilitaries, not only will confidence in the process evaporate, but an Executive will not be set up, because—rightly, as I have said—the right hon. Member for Upper Bann will be unable to appoint Ministers whom, under the legislation, he would otherwise appoint from Sinn Fein.

In the last week, the Prime Minister has replied in a letter to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. I want to draw attention to a specific aspect of that letter. I ask the Under-Secretary of State, if he has the letter to hand, to look at the first paragraph on page 2, in which the Prime Minister writes—this is consistent, as it largely reiterates what the Secretary of State told me on the Floor of the House last week—

"The best prospect of the completion of decommissioning within the two year period is by implementing the Agreement, and thereby removing all excuses from those in possession of arms."

I take issue with the Prime Minister on that. It rings alarm bells. It leads me to believe that every single terrorist prisoner will be released without one ounce of

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Semtex or one gun being handed in. Let me put this to the House. If we—heaven forbid—were Gerry Adams, or one of the Loyalist paramilitary leaders, and if all our prisoners were being released by the Government, what incentive would we have to hand in any guns or explosives?

The last three sentences of our motion probably constitute the only part with which the Secretary of State disagrees. I hope so, because the rest consists entirely of direct quotations from the Prime Minister. The words

"to be implemented in all its parts"

are a quotation from what the Prime Minister said at Balmoral on 14 May. On 20 April, from the Dispatch Box, he used the words:

"several things must happen in parallel in order to build confidence, whether it be decommissioning . . . the release of prisoners".—[*Official Report*, 20 April 1998; Vol. 310, c. 484.]

On 6 May, from the Dispatch Box, he said:

"The only organisations that can qualify to take seats in the government of Northern Ireland and can expect the early release of prisoners are those that have given up violence for good . . . Decommissioning is part of that".—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1998; Vol. 311, c. 711.]

I hope that, in the interests of consistency, Labour Members will support the motion. I presume that—because it is factually correct—the Secretary of State will also support our observation

"that since July over 200 terrorist prisoners have been released early while decommissioning of illegally held arms and explosives has yet to begin".

That is factually correct. It is irrefutable.

Ms Jean Corston (Bristol, East): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacKay: No. I am concluding my speech now.

Where the disagreement comes in is clear from the Prime Minister's response to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition. We say:

"there should be no further early releases of prisoners, and no place in the Northern Ireland Executive for their representatives in the Assembly, until there has been substantial and verifiable decommissioning."

By voting against and tabling the amendment, the Government must disagree with that.

Unless the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister draw a line in the sand and say, "No further terrorist prisoners will be released until"—

Ms Margaret Moran (Luton, South): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. MacKay: No. I have just said that I am concluding my speech.

If the Secretary of State says that no further terrorist prisoners will be released until there is substantial and verifiable decommissioning, she has a real chance of getting decommissioning. If she does not do that, she will not.

If the Secretary of State is going to say to me, "I will be in breach of the agreement," I respectfully say to her that I do not believe so. She has been more than generous—as she knows, in my eyes, somewhat too generous—by already releasing more than 200 terrorist prisoners in the first three months of the two-year period in which she is entitled to do so. Their representatives have decommissioned nowt during the first seven months, so she is entitled to halt prisoner release until decommissioning takes place.

I and my colleagues sincerely believe that the only way in which to obtain decommissioning from all the paramilitaries on both sides of the sectarian divide is to halt prisoner release. We also believe passionately that, unless there is substantial, real and viable decommissioning, the process that the Secretary of State and I support, which we started and which she has sustained, will be ruined. That would be the hugest possible pity for the people of Northern Ireland, so I call on the House to support our motion.

4.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Marjorie Mowlam): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"recognises that the Good Friday Agreement represents an historic opportunity to bring agreed government and political stability to Northern Ireland; acknowledges the progress which has been made by the British and Irish Governments and the Northern Ireland parties in reaching and implementing the Agreement; and believes the only way forward for the people of Northern Ireland to find lasting peace is for the Governments and the parties to move urgently to implement every aspect of the Agreement in full."

I have listened carefully to the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) and I guarantee that, given the chance, I will answer every point that he has raised. Therefore, I welcome the opportunity that has been provided by the Opposition to discuss how the Good Friday agreement is being implemented.

Like many of my colleagues—in view of the questions that they have asked—I believe that the agreement that was endorsed by the people of Northern Ireland and of the south represents the most significant development in Northern Ireland politics for a generation. By implementing it in full, there is a unique opportunity to build a peaceful future for all the people of Northern Ireland. I want to return later to what I think is the basic contradiction in the argument of the right hon. Member for Bracknell. He accepts the security advice that there is an unequivocal ceasefire involving three groups. That is the basis of the agreement. He cannot have it both ways by arguing that that ceasefire is not being maintained, but I will develop that argument later in response to his points.

I welcome, too, the Opposition's support, in particular the help of the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), the right hon. Member for Bracknell and several of their lordships during the yes campaign. I also acknowledge the important role, which the right hon. Member for Bracknell mentioned, that was played by previous Governments in making the agreement possible.

The previous Government took risks and they were right to do so. Their role was acknowledged clearly by Senator Mitchell during last week's Dimbleby lecture when he said:

"The Good Friday Agreement of 1998 traces its lineage to the Anglo-Irish Agreement of 1985 and the Downing Street Declaration of 1993 . . . Tony Blair and Bertie Ahern were brilliant in bringing the process to conclusion, but they would be the first to acknowledge that it was their predecessors who set the stage."

They set the stage in terms of the agreement and, particularly, of two aspects of the agreement which the right hon. Member for Bracknell mentioned—decommissioning and prisoner releases—and to which the Opposition motion refers. They made those difficult choices, which started the process of bringing us to where we are today.

The level of remission available to terrorist prisoners in Northern Ireland has changed alongside developments in the peace process in the past decade. Remission was reduced in 1989 following a particularly horrific year, in which 91 people were killed in Northern Ireland. In 1995, the situation improved. Although punishment beatings and killings continued and no progress was made on decommissioning, the Government of the day judged that the ceasefires were being maintained and that sufficient progress had been made to enable rates of remission to be increased to one half. The Northern Ireland (Remission of Sentences) Act 1995 resulted in the accelerated release of about 240 prisoners and continued despite the breakdown of the IRA ceasefire. Therefore, the issue of the release of prisoners was not new when the parties agreed the provisions in the Good Friday agreement and remission rates were increased to two thirds in 1998.

The desire to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary weapons has also been a part of that process for many years. Again, its history can be traced to previous Governments; first, to the insistence that actual decommissioning would be a pre-condition for talks between loyalists and republicans to take place; then, to the abandonment of that pre-condition following the report of the international body in 1996. Again, the previous Government took a risk—one that paved the way for the opening of talks in June that year—and we fully supported their action.

Decommissioning is an essential part of the Good Friday agreement. Under the agreement—in paragraph 3 on page 20—all participants

"reaffirm their commitment to the total disarmament of all paramilitary organisations. They also confirm their intention to continue to work constructively and in good faith with the Independent Commission, and to use any influence they may have, to achieve the decommissioning of all paramilitary arms within two years . . . in the context of the implementation of the overall settlement".

As a Government, our attitude to decommissioning is crystal clear. We want it to take place and we want it to start now.

Mr. Robert McCartney: Does the right hon. Lady accept that there is no comparison between those previous remissions—under which there was no remission for the most dangerous prisoners, who had been sentenced to life imprisonment—and the present scheme, which allowed the release of the murderers of the two corporals?

Marjorie Mowlam: First, as I outlined in my introduction, what is happening is a progression from what happened with previous schemes under previous Governments. Secondly, the nature of the prisoner releases is a result of the Good Friday agreement and of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, which followed from it, and laid down clear regulations and rules. For example, people should be allowed out on licence for a specific period and, if they broke the licence, they would go back to prison. There are both similarities and differences.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): Does the right hon. Lady agree that, at the present rate of progress, there is a serious risk that all, or at least most, of the relevant prisoners will be released before a single weapon is decommissioned? Does that accord with her construction of the agreement? If it does not, when will she draw a line and say that no more prisoners are to be released until there has been substantial decommissioning?

Marjorie Mowlam: As the right hon. and learned Gentleman has implied, both those issues are dimensions of the present agreement. It has always been the case that progress has to be made in all parts of the agreement for it to work. If progress is not made on all dimensions together, the agreement will not work. It is important for the right hon. and learned Gentleman to remember that much work has been done on different dimensions of the agreement in the intervening months since it was drawn up and put to a referendum and when the first meeting of the Assembly was held, in July. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is saying that he considers that there has been too much progress on one dimension and not enough on another. Of course it is uneven; anybody can see that, but it is important to remember that it takes time to implement the agreement. In the Dimbleby speech last week, Senator Mitchell said that reaching the agreement was difficult and that implementing it is also difficult. It is now important to make progress on all fronts and that will take time.

Of course progress is faster on some aspects than on others. We have a shadow Executive, but not an Executive; we have dialogue on cross-border implementation bodies, but we do not have cross-border bodies. Progress is being made on some matters faster than on others. In my view, it is too early to call a halt on any aspect. The agreement has no preconditions and states that all aspects of it have to move in parallel. Attempts have been made to find a way forward for 12 weeks—since the summer recess. Opposition Members are too quick to attempt to call a halt to one dimension of the agreement.

Mr. Hogg: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady. Of course I understand what she is saying to the House and that she is anxious to retain the Opposition's support for her policy. She is much more likely to retain that support if she tells the House at what point she is prepared to draw a line. The present position suggests to us that all or at least most prisoners could be released without a single weapon being decommissioned. We want to know at what stage, how soon and in what circumstances will she say that no more prisoners are to be released until there has been substantial decommissioning.

Marjorie Mowlam: The right hon. and learned Gentleman and I approach the problem in different ways. He wants to know when I will draw a line and stop a particular aspect of the agreement. I want to see what right

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hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House can do to make sure that we make progress on all dimensions so that the problem that he describes no longer exists.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Marjorie Mowlam: I shall make one more point to the right hon. and learned Gentleman and then I shall make a little more progress before taking further interventions.

The right hon. and learned Gentleman referred to halting the accelerated release of prisoners. He well knows that that can be done under the agreement if the ceasefire is no longer unequivocal or is no longer maintained. That is the basis in the agreement and in the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 of calling a halt to the process.

At the beginning of his speech, the right hon. Member for Bracknell made it clear that he accepts from the security forces, the police and from the advice to me that the ceasefire is intact. Therefore, there is no basis in the agreement for me to act when the evidence—not allegations—that I receive is that the ceasefire is valid.

Mr. MacKay: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: I shall make a little more progress first before giving way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. MacKay: Will the right hon. Lady give way on that point?

Marjorie Mowlam: I shall give way when I have made some progress.

We made it clear at the outset that decommissioning is an obligation, not an option, under the agreement. We and the Irish Government are doing all that we can to hold the parties and the respective paramilitary organisations to that obligation. Both Governments are clear that the parties signed up to complete the decommissioning of all arms within two years—it is important that Opposition Members take note of that.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) *rose—*

Mr. MacKay *rose—*

Marjorie Mowlam: I shall give way to the right hon. Member for Bracknell first.

Mr. MacKay: The Secretary of State rightly quoted my response to the hon. Member for Greenock and Inverclyde (Dr. Godman) when I said that I accepted the security advice to her that there was a ceasefire, but does she accept that a ceasefire is not the same as the total renunciation of violence? Let me quote again what the Prime Minister said at the Dispatch Box:

"Again, I agree with the right hon. Gentleman. It is essential that organisations that want to benefit from the early release of prisoners should give up violence. Decommissioning is part of that, of course"—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1998; Vol. 311, c. 711.]

Her response to my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) has given us the clear impression, I am afraid, that every prisoner could be released without any decommissioning. That would be unacceptable and I cannot believe that she meant to give that impression. I give her this opportunity to correct the record.

Marjorie Mowlam: The right hon. Gentleman must understand that peace is a process: it is not obtained by a switch that one can flip. While the process is being developed, some dimensions move quicker than others. Therefore, at the moment, we have unevenness between different dimensions. That is the nature of the difficulty of implementing an agreement, just as it was difficult to reach that agreement. I emphasise to the right hon. Gentleman that what is important is that every comment that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I have made has been in line with the Good Friday agreement and its implementation.

Mr. Robathan: The right hon. Lady says that developments must be in line with the agreement. The Prime Minister said on 14 May that one of the factors to be taken into account in clarifying whether the terms and spirit of the agreement had been met was that

"the ceasefires are indeed complete and unequivocal; an end to . . . beatings".

Is the Secretary of State satisfied that there has been an end to beatings or are there so-called punishment beatings week in and week out on the streets of west Belfast? Has the Chief Constable suggested to her or her ministerial colleagues that he has firm evidence that may or may not stand up in court that the beatings are the responsibility of paramilitary groups such as Direct Action Against Drugs, the Provisional IRA and therefore, as she has said on many occasions, Sinn Fein?

Marjorie Mowlam: I remember being at the Opposition Dispatch Box at Christmas 1995 when nine murders had happened as a result of the activities of Direct Action Against Drugs. The Minister standing at the Government Dispatch Box said that the ceasefire was being maintained. At a difficult time, I supported the Government of the day because they needed such support when they were trying to hold the process together. It is sad that at a difficult time we do not get the same support from the Opposition.

Punishment beatings are horrific and barbaric acts that ought not to happen. The Government are doing all that we can politically to stop them and the police are doing all that they can in terms of security. However, I must have firm evidence, not allegations, before I can act. That is not what I have received in the vast majority of cases; therefore, I have to make a judgment. In some cases, there is, as the hon. Gentleman suggests, a tenuous relationship between such acts and certain organisations—it would not stand up in court, but there is one. I have to make a judgment in the round as to whether that is sufficient to change the decision that I have made on an organisation in relation to despecifying prisoners, or whatever.

As the hon. Member for Blaby (Mr. Robathan) will remember, in the debate on the Loyalist Volunteer Force on 17 November, the Opposition spokesman talked about the difficulties. He said that punishment beatings continued, but that in relation to the LVF there was a balanced judgment to be made. The Opposition made it in favour of the LVF. Such a judgment should be left to

some of us who have more information than Opposition Members. The hon. Member for Blaby accepts that that information is important.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): As all that has been done since the agreement was signed has been in accordance with that agreement, including the release of prisoners, and as we all want decommissioning, what sort of message does my right hon. Friend believe that the motion might send to Belfast at a time of delicate negotiations and a delicate political position? Would it not be unfortunate if the House was seen to be divided when the Opposition say that they are in agreement with what was negotiated on Good Friday?

Marjorie Mowlam: I have a great deal of sympathy with my hon. Friend's remarks. The question is not merely one of decommissioning, but of making sure that the agreement, which says that there should be an unequivocal ceasefire and that that should be the basis for prisoner releases—

Mr. Paterson: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: Let me finish. The question is whether an unequivocal ceasefire is in place. The basis of the points made by Conservative Members is that an unequivocal ceasefire is not being maintained, yet the right hon. Member for Bracknell said that evidence provided to us suggesting that the ceasefire is being maintained is correct, so the Conservative Members' argument lacks foundation. What is important is that Opposition Members realise that the agreement has not broken down: there is still momentum and people are still talking. The best way to get the different dimensions implemented is to make sure that progress continues to be made. That is what I intend to do now.

No previous Government have succeeded in achieving the decommissioning of paramilitary weapons. No previous Government have done as much as the current Government have to try to secure the decommissioning of all paramilitary weapons. The best way to ensure that all paramilitary weapons are decommissioned is to implement the Good Friday agreement in full. We are now at a crucial stage in Northern Ireland. The work continues on trying to reach an agreement on the ground about the nature of cross-border implementation bodies and departmental structures within Northern Ireland. A deal should be close. I wish that it had been reached earlier, but it requires confidence and leadership on all sides.

Sir Brian Mawhinney (North–West Cambridgeshire): Does the Secretary of State accept that I think that her judgment is broadly right when she says that, in Northern Ireland, decisions have to be taken on the balance? The issues are not cut and dried: they were not when the Conservatives were in government and I was one of the people who had to make those decisions occasionally. I accept that no radical change has occurred simply because the party in government has changed. Therefore, I broadly accept what she says.

Does the right hon. Lady also accept that those of us who understand the issues in Northern Ireland understand that there would have been no Good Friday agreement without prisoner release? She knows, because I have told her, that I deplore that and find it distasteful, as do many other hon. Members on both sides of the House, but that was the reality. In the same way, it is a reality that there would have been no agreement without the commitment to decommission.

I understand the Secretary of State's point of view; she in a difficult, tense and messy situation and I shall not criticise her for trying to implement the agreement. However, does she accept that the reason fundamental concern is arising is that historically there has never been any decommissioning in Northern Ireland, or in Ireland, at the end of periods of violence? Does she accept that, sooner or later, to help to defuse that growing anxiety, the Government will have to be a little more forthcoming about what will be the issues surrounding decommissioning or the lack of decommissioning; and the danger that that might pose to the agreement?

Marjorie Mowlam: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments and agree with him that the Good Friday agreement is a package, made up of several different dimensions, and that the agreement would not have been reached without all those dimensions being included. Prisoner release, accelerated release and decommissioning are essential elements. Like every other hon. Member, I should like decommissioning to start now, because that would help to bring much-needed confidence to the process and so enable both sides to continue to make progress on the implementation of the agreement. I agree with the general thrust of the right hon. Gentleman's comments.

We have to look at the nature of the agreement, which says that the different dimensions are linked and that the package must be moved as a whole. In reality, that is the only practicable way in which the agreement can be implemented. Decommissioning would be a positive step, so I want it to happen sooner rather than later. However, at present, we need to make sure that progress is being made on other dimensions of the agreement. The Independent International Commission on Decommissioning is up and running, General de Chastelain is in place and modalities are being discussed with representatives of the different parties linked to paramilitary groups. There has at least been some progress—although not very much, as Opposition Members have said.

We do not yet have an Executive: we have a shadow Executive. We need a north-south ministerial council and we are yet to appoint cross-border implementation bodies and agree the Northern Ireland Departments. We have a long way to go on several dimensions. However, I ask Opposition Members: for goodness sake, give the people of Northern Ireland and their political leaders who have shown such determination and courage up till now the time and space to find a way forward. That is what they need. Nobody wants to see any dimension of the agreement fail.

Mr. Paterson *rose—*

Marjorie Mowlam: Let me make some more progress.

We are at a crucial stage and other aspects of the agreement must be implemented. I hope that some of the recriminations that we are hearing both here and outside

[Marjorie Mowlam]

this place will fade and we will have a chance to reach agreement on some points before Christmas. We must do more to build confidence in the agreement.

Mr. Paterson: I am most grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. She mentioned the people of Northern Ireland. What confidence can they have in the agreement when there have been 400 violent attacks by terrorists in the period to October? That trend is accelerating, with 157 such attacks in November. How can the people of Northern Ireland remain confident in the situation when the Secretary of State and Labour Back Benchers are absolutely determined to turn a blind eye to that violence?

Marjorie Mowlam: I suggest that the hon. Gentleman checks his statistics before he starts citing round numbers. It is not clear whether there were more of such incidents under his Government or ours—it depends how one collates the statistics. I agree that the punishment beatings, shootings and murders are totally unacceptable. We and the people of Northern Ireland are trying, through the Good Friday agreement, to avoid a return to violence.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the views of the people of Northern Ireland. Many of those to whom I speak—I am in Northern Ireland for most of the week—say that they find the situation difficult. The victims, particularly, have had a tough time in the past few months as prisoners have been released. Many families suffer terribly when they see those people exiting prison. I have no doubt that some find the situation difficult. However, many of those families say, "I don't like what you're doing; it's not easy. But if it means that other families will not have to suffer as we have suffered, it will be worth it."

The Good Friday agreement is not perfect and the peace is not perfect—hon. Members' contributions today have shown that it is far from perfect. However, I believe that progress is being made. It is only a short time since the agreement was signed and we need space to accommodate it. We will not see change overnight: it will take days, weeks and months for people to accommodate the different dimensions of the agreement. Yes, it is taking time, but we should not say, "It's getting worse, so let's go backwards". If the Good Friday agreement breaks down, people across the divide will see it as a return to the bad times and to violence. We must do all that we can to ensure that the Good Friday agreement has a chance of success.

Mr. Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) *rose—*

Marjorie Mowlam: I am sorry, I will not give way. I must make progress.

Let us be clear about the Opposition motion's reference to prisoners, to which many Conservative Members have alluded. The agreement is clear on that point. It says:

> "Prisoners affiliated to organisations which have not established or are not maintaining a complete and unequivocal ceasefire will not benefit"—

from early releases.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell said that he accepted our security advice as correct, but the Opposition are asking the Government to declare that the ceasefires by the IRA, the UVF and the UDA are not being maintained.

Mr. MacKay: I repeat what the Prime Minister said, which I still accept. He said on the Floor of the House and in the referendum campaign that the renunciation of violence—which, as the right hon. Lady will agree, is linked to the early release of prisoners—must include decommissioning. As there is no sight or sign of decommissioning after seven months, the renunciation of violence that is the basis of her releasing prisoners is not in place.

Marjorie Mowlam: The renunciation of violence is central, but the right hon. Gentleman fails to understand that, as the Prime Minister said, one decides whether there is a fundamental renunciation of violence on the basis of whether the ceasefire is maintained and there is an unequivocal commitment to it. I have said to him on several occasions that, if there is evidence to the contrary, I will seriously review it, but there is none. That means that the organisations are maintaining their ceasefire and prisoner release is in order.

Mr. Paterson: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: No, I have been generous to the hon. Gentleman and others. I must make progress.

Mr. Peter Robinson (Belfast, East): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: No, I have just said that I must make progress.

Let me return to the point about firm evidenced, I have said that the police, the Army and security advisers have argued that the ceasefires continue in the case of the IRA, UVF and UDA.

As I said, I accept that the peace is not perfect. I acknowledge that punishment beatings have continued. They are reprehensible and must end. They continued during the time of my predecessor in the previous Government. We supported him in his efforts because there are no easy answers. Politically, we are doing all that we can, and the police are doing all that they can in security terms, to bring to justice those who are responsible for punishment beatings.

The peace is not without risks. No peace ever is, but the benefits of peace are there for all to see. I am in no doubt that, if I were to announce today that the ceasefires are at an end, despite the fact that the advice that we are receiving proves that they are not, I would be risking the whole Good Friday agreement and its benefits. That is what the Opposition are asking us to do.

No one who has any recent experience of Northern Ireland could fail to notice the impact that peace is having. I saw for myself on Saturday what peace means for the people of Belfast. For the first time in 30 years, people were out doing their Christmas shopping and preparing and hoping for a festive season free from violence. The peace process is slow and will not happen overnight. We must give people time to come to terms with all the changes that are happening in their lives.

There are, of course, still many problems and hurdles to overcome. As Senator Mitchell and others have said, the implementation of the agreement is as difficult as reaching the agreement itself. There have been difficulties over the nature of cross-border implementation bodies, the number and structure of Northern Ireland Departments, the formation of the Executive and decommissioning. We have to resolve all those problems. Alongside all the other aspects of the agreement, the commitments made under the agreement must be honoured in full. To abandon our commitments under the agreement at this stage and not act in line with the agreement, which is what the Opposition are tonight asking us to do, would be to finish any prospect of holding other parties to theirs. It would be very short sighted.

The questions that the Opposition have been asking are valid ones. I know that because, as I said, I am asked them by people in Northern Ireland. If they are valid for the people there, they are doubly valid for those who have suffered, yet many people say that for peace we must work together to find a way forward. That, I believe, is what many of the leaders in the talks are now doing. The questions are valid, but the answers that the Opposition are offering are not.

We cannot rewrite the agreement. It is not ours to rewrite. We cannot introduce direct linkages between one aspect of the agreement and another which were not agreed by the parties themselves; nor can we introduce new preconditions, which is what the Opposition are asking us to do. This is my judgment. It is not an easy judgment, but it is a judgment that I make based on the best information available to me from the police and the security services in Northern Ireland.

The significance of the Good Friday agreement has been recognised not only at home but abroad. Yesterday, in Washington, the achievements of the party leaders who so courageously negotiated the agreement were recognised by the National Democratic Institute. Tomorrow, in Oslo, the right hon. Member for Upper Bann (Mr. Trimble) and the hon. Member for Foyle (Mr. Hume), representing the two main communities, will receive the Nobel peace prize—a fitting honour for them and the people whom they represent.

Our most important focus now must be on Northern Ireland and on helping those in Northern Ireland who are trying to implement the agreement—the best way to get decommissioning. No other interest should come before that. People should look to their own conscience to ensure that they are doing all they can in the best interests of the people of Northern Ireland and are keeping those interests closest to their heart. With that in mind, I urge the House to reject the Opposition motion and to support the Government amendment.

5.2 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): Anyone who has held the position currently filled by the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland feels a certain diffidence in contributing to a debate of this kind, and I also accept that it is always the wrong time and always difficult to second-guess the Ministers and the Prime Minister who are responsible for this extremely difficult process in which they are engaged.

The Secretary of State is always a little more correct than my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) in saying that the process did not start with the Downing Street declaration. I do not claim the pride of authorship, as it started before me. Of course, the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which did not have universal support in the House, was the start of a process and a change in attitude which has led to the situation that we hope will lead to a permanent peace. It is part of a very long process which has effectively been bipartisan all the way.

I have to say to Labour Members, some of whom are new, that I did not appreciate some of the interventions that we heard today. The fact that the process was bipartisan never meant that the House was gagged or unable to express its opinion. There are issues over which the House would not have won respect had it failed to make it clear that there were alternative points of view. The former Opposition—now the Government—did not hesitate to make their points or to vote against me and my colleagues when they felt that they needed to do so.

This is not a very helpful aside, but it seems that some Labour Back Benchers—I do not know whether they are organised by active Parliamentary Private Secretaries—feel that there must be no criticism of the Government and that they must interrupt and intervene on Opposition spokesmen. It seems that certain Labour Back Benchers are almost trying to provoke the end of bipartisanship.

The House should debate the motion, which deals with a serious issue. The motion will not be carried—it will not change Government policy—but I hope that no one is suggesting that it is improper for the House even to express an opinion and for us even to vote on the matter. Labour Members did not hesitate to vote and express their views on this matter when they were in opposition. We accepted that they had the right to do so. I hope that we put the arguments, the motion and the vote in the right context.

As somebody who was a personal recipient of bipartisanship, which I appreciated, I accepted that it did not make one free of criticism. The Secretary of State can look after herself; she does not need her Back Benchers to try to intervene in such an unfortunate way on my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell, our Front-Bench spokesman, in order to undermine him.

We have, without question, a common objective. Too many of us have devoted too much of our lives, including some pretty unpleasant moments, trying to get where we are today to throw the process aside lightly. That does not mean that there are not occasions on which we have worries and concerns and want to exercise our rights as Members of Parliament—Back-Bench or Front-Bench—and express our views to the Government. It is the duty of the Opposition to do so.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) pointed out well, it has not surprised anybody, including that Secretary of State, that decommissioning is the most difficult of issues. The hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) will remember that the British-Irish interparliamentary body happened to be meeting on the day of the Downing Street declaration. As we were gathered round, there was a great expression of good will when the news came that Albert Reynolds and my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major) had signed the declaration. That afternoon, there was a debate, in what should have been a great spirit of good will. I was one of those who said

[Mr. Tom King]

that decommissioning was very important and that, if we are to have a peace process in Northern Ireland, the removal of weapons is a very important part of it.

As the hon. Member for Walsall, North may remember, reaction from those representing the Irish side of the British-Irish parliamentary body was one of absolute horror. They saw that statement as a traditional British attempt to undermine the process. Not one of them believed that decommissioning could be achieved and that the Downing Street declaration could possibly be moving in that direction. One realised then the gap of history between the British and Irish sides on that issue. It was apparent from day one of the signing of the Downing Street declaration.

Mr. Robert McCartney: Does the right hon. Gentleman recollect that, on the day after the meeting to which he referred, the Foreign Affairs Minister in the Dail told Sinn Fein, "This does not mean that you can get into the democratic process, take a look around and then retire if it does not suit you. It means giving up, handing in your weapons now"? That point was made from day one.

Mr. King: I do not remember that particular reference, although I recall similar ones.

We knew as we entered the process—we hope that the Good Friday agreement is the culmination of the achievement of the Downing Street declaration—that it would involve tough decisions on both sides. I have my own memories, all too sad and bitter. I was Secretary of State when the appalling murder of the corporals took place, before the country's eyes, on television. Yet I know that my memories are nothing compared with the suffering and pain and the price that the families and friends of those who died have had to pay.

All this means a change of attitude. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire said, it means that things that are not acceptable in a normal democratic society—such as people who are guilty of crimes not having to pay the full penalty for them—must be done. We accept, with a heavy heart, that a change of attitude, concession and some compromise are necessary for the greater good of the greatest number of people—for peace in Northern Ireland. Concessions are needed from both sides. The worry is that they are not coming—at least, that impression has been given.

I am not in the loop of whatever negotiations may be taking place between the Government, Sinn Fein representatives and others, but the perception is that, while the Government's statements are admirable—I have no quarrel with any statement that the Government have made, from the statement made by the Prime Minister on 20 April 1998, up to and including that made by the Secretary of State on 2 December 1998—nothing has happened.

As the Secretary of State rightly said, there has been a bit of a legalistic argument. If Martin McGuinness appears on television, a phrase that seems to echo regularly is a question about a precondition. The right hon. Lady has answered that by saying that it is not a precondition but an obligation. That is what she said—yet that obligation does not seem to be being performed.

Perhaps decommissioning is difficult to organise. Perhaps it is a very complicated process. Perhaps meetings must be held, such as the meeting of the Army council which I believe was held yesterday. The real worry is that to which my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Cambridgeshire alluded. Decommissioning is not something that will come through in the fulness of time. The real worry is that it will not come through at all. It is long established in Irish tradition that, as "when the pike is in the thatch", one does not surrender one's weapons, and of course one does not use the word "surrender"—that word would be unacceptable.

I understand the problems that the Government have, and I do not expect the Government to support the Opposition motion. However, given all the difficulties, I believe that the House, and Conservative Members at least, should speak up for the very many people in Northern Ireland who say, "It is not working. What will happen? Will people be allowed to keep all these weapons? Will they be allowed to keep heavy machine guns? Will they be allowed to keep sniper rifles? Will they be allowed to keep rocket launchers?" The Secretary of State knows that that is true, because she must be hearing such questions morning, noon and night.

I do not worry so much about Semtex, because everyone knows that a good load of fertiliser, properly adapted, probably gives people all the threat that they need. Do we say, at the end of the list, that personal protection weapons remain as some residual defence against the fear of a loyalist mob and are the last element in the trust-building structure that will need to be built? There must be some approach that starts to give people confidence that there is no truth in the long-standing traditional belief that no decommissioning will ever happen.

There must be movement—the hard choice that comes from leadership. That will have to come from the republican movement. Otherwise, I see, to my greatest sadness, and tragically for the people of Northern Ireland, the real danger that the agreement will not succeed. It deserves to succeed, and yet, in the end, if certain people are not prepared to make any movement whatever, the position of the Secretary of State in statements that she has made, and the position of the Prime Minister in statements that he has made, will become impossible.

I am not only talking to the Secretary of State. I hope that the debate and the motion will be not unhelpful to the Government in discussions that they may be having with what I would describe as other people, in communicating the truth that, in the end, they will be unable to sustain their position; that they will be unable to be more and more understanding of other people's difficulties and problems; and that there will come a moment when they will be unable to accept what is put to them. That moment will come because the thin, small voice that comes from the Opposition side of the Chamber today will grow and grow, and more and more reasonable-minded people will say, "This simply is not acceptable".

I say that not in an attempt to second-guess, because I understand something of the significant difficulties on this issue, but to say, through the Secretary of State to another audience, that that audience must understand that, unless there is some movement over the issue, the lack of movement threatens to destroy the whole process. That would be a tragedy for the whole United Kingdom and most particularly for all the people in the island of Ireland, whom the Secretary of State and so many others have worked so hard to help.

5.14 pm

Mr. Eddie McGrady (South Down): It was with something of a heavy heart that I learned that tonight's debate was taking place, at the Opposition's behest, at a time of the greatest possible sensitivity in the inter-party negotiations taking place in Belfast. The right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) emphasised that the debate was not a breach of the bipartisan approach, but the tenor of the remark indicated to me that there was an element of cherry-picking—to use that hackneyed phrase—in the motion on decommissioning and prisoners.

There are many aspects to the agreement. There is the political aspect, in terms of the inter-party negotiations and structures, north and south, east and west, and within Northern Ireland, and there are three other major elements: decommissioning, prisoner release and the reform of the Royal Ulster Constabulary. The latter three aspects are so sensitive that the parties—I think wisely—said, "The matters should be handed to independent commissions, the first on decommissioning, the second on the consequences of prisoner release, and the third, to the Patten commission on the RUC."

I say as an important aside that it is not insignificant that the third issue was omitted from the Opposition motion. The motion does not seem to embody the concern, often expressed by Conservative Members, that all matters should move forward together. That is an indication—almost a flagging up—of the danger that Conservative Members are moving into partisanship in terms of the negotiation that we are very delicately entered into. The right hon. Member for Bracknell, the Conservative party and all hon. Members know that the decommissioning issue has been addressed not as an element of the agreement but as a precondition to advancement and implementation of the agreement.

Mr. MacKay: Let me clarify one thing. We have not mentioned policing because the commission on policing, chaired by Chris Patten, is in full process. As far as I can tell, it is making good progress. Public meetings are being held around the Province, in the hon. Gentleman's constituency and elsewhere, so there is no need for concern. That is proceeding; surely that is right and proper.

To suggest that debating Northern Ireland matters in the House, at any time, affects the process of the negotiation is to try to gag the House, and I am sure that the hon. Gentleman does not want to do that. I do not believe that raising matters of decommissioning has an impact on the important matters that he and his colleagues are continuing to discuss in connection with north-south bodies. I mentioned those discussions, and I said that I did not wish to become directly involved in them, because I thought that it was best for the political parties that are negotiating to be involved in them. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman agrees with that.

Mr. McGrady: The right hon. Gentleman, in an intervention, has said that those matters are progressing. So is the matter of decommissioning, in the international commission. I understand that the membership has been completed, and that various other aspects of the modalities are being processed. I am not privy to the internal workings of that commission, nor is it appropriate that I should be, because this matter, on which I have no expertise, is so delicate that it has been put in the hands of an international commission.

Decommissioning and prisoner release were scheduled in terms of the totality of the agreement. I understand that the decommissioning aspect of the agreement takes us up to May 2000. Let me say, initially and clearly, that I, my party and the people whom we represent want decommissioning as much as—perhaps more than—anyone else, because, unfortunately, statistics show that my community suffered more than any other from the use of weapons and explosives, and that it would be in my interests, not just that weapons and explosives be withdrawn from use, but that the paraphernalia and the structure of paramilitarism be eradicated from our society, once and for all, in the years ahead. I say "in the years ahead" because our community in Northern Ireland has suffered 30 years of intense violence, division and hatreds.

On Second Reading of the Bill that became the Northern Ireland Act 1998 I said as strongly as I possibly could that the House could not and should not expect that, after 30 years, we could turn a key and switch off all violent activities. Unfortunately, we are seeing those words come to pass. Old debts are being settled. Mafia-type violence is being perpetrated in our society.

If other hon. Members lived in the society in which I live, they would see a tremendous difference between where we were last year and where we are this year. That difference has already been referred to, and it does not apply only to yuletide. The difference can be seen every day and every night. We can go down our streets with our families and children and not be concerned about the bomb or bullet flying and destroying us. We can have peace of mind in social recreation. It is an enormous advance on where we were. That comes under the heading of peace, and peace has many pillars to support it. One such pillar is the political process. My party and I believe that we cannot have stable and permanent peace without a political structure, arrangement and agreement to support and back it and to ensure that the gun will never return to Irish politics.

There is some cynicism about decommissioning. An old person in my constituency who had some experience of the past once said to me that if I were to put a gun on the table and no one touched it, it would be there in 1,000 years' time without anyone suffering the consequences of it. There is more in that statement than meets the eye. It is the use of weapons and explosives against people and property that is the problem, not that they rot in a cave or a dug-out or whatever. I hope that there will be actual and physical decommissioning. As I have also said, I hope that there will be disbandment of the paramilitary structures, which will allow that to take place.

Unless we handle the peace process in the right way, the gun will not be taken out of Irish politics. If we fail and handle the process wrongly, the political process will be destroyed, and with it, the peace for which we have all striven. So much depends on the political process, and that is why all the matters that relate to the agreement must move forward. They will not move in unison but they have to move forward gradually. We must implement the agreement which was reached last Wednesday night into Thursday morning. It was dissipated in the dawn hours. It would give confidence and place the necessary moral and political pressures on the paramilitaries, both loyalist and republican, who are there with their weapons. They would be forced into a process of decommissioning.

[Mr. McGrady]

That is what we are all trying to achieve by inter-party negotiations and the various commissions that have been set up. Unless we can have the room and the atmosphere to bring those negotiations and commissions to a conclusion, we are forfeiting the political process and the peace that we have learnt after three decades to appreciate. We now know what we were missing for so long.

Some of my constituents have suffered the loss of their fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters and other relatives. They are grieving and they are traumatised. The political process asked them for another sacrifice over and above that which was visited upon them. We asked them to make a voluntary sacrifice for the sake of our society. We said, "Those who perpetrated those crimes on you and your family will be released within the cycle of the agreement. This will be difficult for you, and traumatic."

Of all those to whom I have spoken, no one has said, "Do not do that." Every one of them was prepared to make this enormous and additional sacrifice for the greater good of the community. They were all willing to do so because it was for the greater good of the community. They did not want eventually the same sacrifice and trauma to be visited on yet another person or family.

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): I appreciate what the hon. Gentleman says but I have to tell him that I have met some of his constituents who do not hold the view that he has described. A Mrs. Irene Cochrane from Downpatrick lost her son who was serving with the Ulster Defence Regiment. She certainly does not hold the view that it is right for the prisoners to be released.

The hon. Gentleman talks about progress on decommissioning. The reality is that the international commission has been in place for many months, as has legislation and as have the modalities. There is no more progress to be made on these issues. Everything is now in place, and it has been for many months. But how many guns and bullets have been handed in? The hon. Gentleman knows that nothing has happened on these issues.

The release of prisoners is a mandatory and not a voluntary process, and one that the victims have no option but to accept. If they are being asked to accept that, society surely is entitled to require the decommissioning of weapons. More than half the prisoners are now out and yet not one bullet has been handed over. Imagine the outcry that there would have been—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): Order. The hon. Gentleman is repeating himself in his own intervention.

Mr. McGrady: I take on board what the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) has said about members of certain families resenting the release of prisoners. I am saying that the vast majority of those whom I have met have said, with great reluctance and great difficulty, "If this sacrifice must be made yet again, for the greater good of our community and for peace for our children, we are prepared to wear this."

Yes, there has been prisoner release and no physical decommissioning of a weapon such as a gun or Semtex. However, why do we relate one with the other when they are separate issues? As I understand it, the process of prisoner release was to establish the ceasefire, thereby triggering the process by which decommissioning could take place. We must have the moral and political authority to force those who are still holding weapons, ammunition and Semtex to decommission because of the force of political and moral argument.

The intervention of the hon. Member for Lagan Valley included the word "voluntary". In a sense—I say this at the risk of being misunderstood—at the end of the day decommissioning will be a voluntary decision. No one—neither members of the security forces nor anyone else—can force decommissioning. No one can force the surrender of even one gun. We must establish the conditions in our community where moral and political authority will demand and deliver the decommissioning process. Thirty years of the most intense security surveillance and penetration did nothing to bring about decommissioning or to stem the flow of weapons. Let us take that as another aspect of decommissioning.

Everyone in the House knows that there could be decommissioning of whatever anyone liked tomorrow. That would leave us all standing like the emperor, politically naked. The following day the same people could re-arm and regroup quite easily. That is why we are talking not merely about physical decommissioning but about a decommissioning of the mind that requires us to ensure that the pursuance of any political objective with the use of weapons can no longer be tolerated and is no longer tolerated by any community in Ireland, north or south. The communities have already indicated that through the referendums in both north and south. Without equivocation, the people said that violence is out and weapons must not ever be used again in Ireland in pursuit of a political objective.

Mr. Grieve: I am sure that the hon. Gentleman would agree that the obligation—as it was described by the Secretary of State—to decommission would not have been put in the agreement unless it was thought necessary to make the peace process work. Does he also agree that the process was designed to be gradual and spread out over two years? How does he envisage the time frame in which decommissioning should take place within that two-year period?

Mr. McGrady: The Good Friday agreement does not give a timetable, except a finishing date of May 2000, as I have already said. We must create the moral thrust and the political environment that will make decommissioning imperative. We must create the additional trust that will enable—or force—the paramilitaries of either persuasion to give up their weapons as their part in a trust-building exercise with the opposite communities.

Mr. Robert McCartney: If there is no power that will make the paramilitaries give up their weapons now, what security do we have to assure us—no matter what concessions we make—that they will give up their weapons within the two years? What are we to hope for if nothing can compel those thugs and terrorists to disarm?

Mr. McGrady: The hon. and learned Gentleman cannot have been listening to me. I have said time and again that the only way that we can force decommissioning is by moral persuasion and political

structures that make it impossible for paramilitaries to continue their activities with any support from either community.

The alternative required by the motion is to stop releasing prisoners, cut off the negotiations and bring everything to a halt until some weapons and Semtex are put on the table. If that is the logical consequence of the motion, it is a recipe for total disaster. The motion did not suggest an alternative process and nor did any of the hon. Members who have contributed so far. No doubt, we will receive the benefit of the wisdom of those hon. Members who will contribute later.

We have a difficult and delicate political process in train at the moment and this motion is giving all the wrong signals to those people who wish to destroy the edifice of political negotiation, decommissioning and prisoner release that has been so delicately brought together in one package. That process did not happen in a year or two: it took three decades to put it together. Three months could destroy it. Opposition Members who will presumably push the motion to a vote tonight are saying that we must halt all the processes until a gun or pound of Semtex is put on the table. That is putting a political weapon into the hands of those who say no to the Belfast agreement—Opposition Members are aligning themselves with that political attitude—and giving an additional weapon to the likes of the Provisional IRA and the UVF to use for further bargaining. We are trying to achieve a moral and political authority that will force the paramilitaries to decommission and I therefore hope that the Opposition will not press the motion to a vote.

5.35 pm

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): This is a difficult time in Northern Irish politics and a difficult process is under way. The stakes are enormously high and I hope that we can all agree that the last thing that we need is to use the issue as a party political opportunity instead of an opportunity to secure peace in Northern Ireland.

I shall assume in my speech that the Conservatives' intention is not to try to score party political points, because to do so would be in contravention of the spirit of the bipartisan agreement. In that context, I am surprised that the Conservatives have chosen to debate the issue in this form. It is not clear that this debate will make it easier for those who are trying so hard to negotiate, on decommissioning and in so many other areas, to achieve the results that we all want. Clearly, the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) feels differently and he is entitled to do so, but we need to recognise the difference between legitimate concerns and the impact that a debate such as this may have in the longer term on what we are trying to achieve.

I was encouraged when the right hon. Member for Bracknell reaffirmed the Conservatives' commitment in spirit and in word to the Good Friday agreement. That is at the core of this debate. Technically, the Good Friday agreement has not been breached in any way. The hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) made it clear that the agreement contains an objective and unarguable two-year time frame. No staging posts have been written into the agreement, for good and pragmatic reasons. However, I am sure that all hon. Members wish to see progress on decommissioning soon, because a pressure is welling up in various bodies in Northern Ireland, political and non-political, and nervousness is growing.

Mr. Donaldson: Is the hon. Gentleman aware of a timetable for the release of prisoners in the Belfast agreement, or is the situation the same as for decommissioning—with no specific timetable, only a target date? Does he accept that we have had much progress on prisoner releases and no progress on decommissioning?

Mr. Öpik: The target date in the Good Friday agreement for prisoner releases is June 1999, so prisoner releases need to be completed ahead of decommissioning. To that extent, while we have talked about a parallel time frame, the two matters are likely to proceed at slightly different rates. The process has to contain a degree of good will as well as an element of risk. I did not hear Conservative Members argue when prisoner releases began that they were necessarily bad, although I stand to be corrected. The concern about prisoner releases has evolved as a result of the apparent non-movement on decommissioning.

Mr. Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury): At the time, I and several of my hon. Friends asked the Government why the paramilitaries would give up their arms after all the prisoners had been released. What reason would the paramilitaries then have to give up their arms, since the Government would have played their trump card?

Mr. Öpik: I am not here to provide a tutorial on the elements of the Good Friday agreement; indeed, there are right hon. and hon. Members present who are far more competent to do so. However, I must point out to the hon. Gentleman that there is two-way process for prisoner releases. If the conditions are breached, the opportunity for those people to remain as free individuals falls. That would apply if, for example, there were a break in the ceasefire. It might be difficult to implement that, but the hon. Gentleman must know that there is that two-way condition.

The Conservative's apparently intransigent position, that fear of falling, seems to motivate their agenda. As far as I can tell from the motion, the Conservatives are effectively focusing on one aspect—an important aspect—which is decommissioning, while taking their eye off the bigger ball. The debate is not really about decommissioning and prisoner releases; it is about securing a lasting peace with which all sides in Northern Ireland can live.

What is lacking here is a willingness to accept a degree of risk, which has probably been largely responsible for the progress that we have made so far. I would go so far as to say that, in the spirit of the Good Friday agreement, the motion operates on the assumption of a new condition. Just as we can debate the timetable, and so forth, so I point out unequivocally to the right hon. Member for Bracknell that there is nothing in the Good Friday agreement which states that prisoner releases must stop if the decommissioning process has not yet reached a specific staging post.

I stress again that I do not say that because I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman's very reasonable nervousness with regard to the length of time that

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decommissioning has taken. Furthermore, I agree with his past comments that Sinn Fein must not hide behind fanuous excuses in order to vacillate; nor must they use legalistic arguments in order to pretend that they do not have a moral responsibility to participate. Once again, that has been a positive contribution made by Conservative Members in many debates.

We are all familiar with the arguments on decommissioning because we seem to have this debate once every two weeks in the House. Decommissioning has three key elements which are obstacles to its proceeding at a faster rate. One is the position of the various groups involved as they try to balance themselves between where they came from historically, briefly described by the hon. Member for South Down, and where they are heading in the future.

The second element is one of symbolism. Let us not pretend: an enormous amount of symbolism is associated with decommissioning. It is not easy for those involved to talk about it in public because, ultimately, there are big internal frictions in the organisations themselves over decommissioning.

The third element is one of strategy. People are engaged in tough negotiations in the Province. Decommissioning is a natural area for intense negotiations. That is not to justify the lack of progress on decommissioning, but it is to highlight the danger of putting the spotlight on decommissioning at a time when, unquestionably, there are processes and negotiations at a high level within the organisations and between the Government and those organisations in trying to secure progress. I would go as far as to say that that spotlight is rather unhelpful because it makes people take rather more intransigent positions in public than they might in private.

Punishment beatings have been mentioned. Had the official Opposition wanted a constructive debate today on Northern Ireland in which they could secure the support of both sides of the House, they might have chosen a motion on punishment beatings. I think that all hon. Members agree that an underlying level of insidious violence continues. Punishment beatings might more accurately be called mutilation attacks. There are those who have suffered such violence despite the official ceasefire.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): I find the hon. Gentleman's train of thought interesting. Is he telling the House that, if there were a motion that no more prisoners should be released until punishment beatings stopped, he and his party would vote for it?

Mr. Öpik: No, we would not. As far as I can tell, the key issue—*[Interruption.]*—as the jeering from the Back Bench confirms, is that there are those, and I am not suggesting that Conservative Front-Bench spokesmen are among them, who seek to win party political points on an issue which it is profoundly important to set aside if the Conservatives are to honour the spirit of the bipartisan agreement.

To clarify my point—I apologise if I did not make it clearly enough—had we debated mutilation attacks and pressed the Secretary of State to make some investment of time and energy to show that they were unacceptable, we would certainly have voted with the Conservatives, and I should like to think that the House would not have divided on such a matter.

I highlight that point to show that talking about decommissioning is nowhere near as helpful as talking about the processes and the issues that are causing harm to individuals, such as the mutilation beatings. I hope that we will move away from calling them punishment beatings. Anyone who believes that a punishment beating is a legitimate form of justice is living in an age which passed away hundreds of years ago.

Let us consider the effect of the Opposition motion. What will happen if it is passed? Once again, this is an area of judgment, and clearly, my judgment is different from that of the right hon. Member for Bracknell. To pass that motion would be a gift-wrapped reason for those hard-line terrorists who want to see a resumption of violence to do exactly that. I say that because they could then turn round and say, "As you can see, the process has faltered."

However much the right hon. Member for Bracknell believes that he could explain it otherwise to the public, if the motion were passed, it would be almost impossible for it not to send a signal around the world that the House no longer believes that it can honour its half of the commitment in the Good Friday agreement. To me, that would be an absolute tragedy.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell may be sceptical about that problem and the likelihood of others misinterpreting the situation, but I remind him of the events in September this year when he himself commented on the Liberal Democrats' apparent commitment to vote against the prevention of terrorism legislation in the future. That completely fallacious idea did the rounds in the media and led the right hon. Gentleman, a man who is clued up about what is happening in Northern Ireland, to believe that it was the Liberal Democrats' position. He must know that he is playing with fire in tabling this motion because there are so many people who will see it as a sign of the breakdown of the bipartisan agreement.

I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will be assiduous in ensuring that that misunderstanding does not go beyond this debate and that there is no danger that, in tomorrow's papers, there will be the slightest implication that the Conservatives are thinking of withdrawing from the bipartisan agreement. I wish him all speed in achieving that, however vigorous the reassurances to the press will need to be.

Lastly, I wish to compliment all those who have brought us thus far. Some insightful comments have been made. For example, the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) clearly had a detailed understanding of the issues. In addition, the right hon. Member for Bracknell, who makes regular visits to the Province, is apprised of what is going on there. In congratulating those people, I must also think of those who operate in the sphere of northern Irish politics. I have much admiration for those who have brought us so far.

My request to those in the Chamber who are actively engaged in the politics of the Province is that they will not feel bound to take a binary decision. I hope that they do not feel that the spotlight, of which I talked earlier, in some way corrals them into taking a position that is more hard line than they might otherwise adopt.

The official Opposition may have felt the need to make those points, but I am not sure that it was entirely prudent to do so in this way. However, they have now done so and doubtless we shall have other similar debates. Given the political realities, as the right hon. Member for Bridgwater said, there is no prospect of the motion's being passed. Therefore, the only logic in voting for it is to stake a claim that can be realised as accurate only if the peace process fails.

We must plan for success, not for failure. Therefore, it is rather imprudent to corral the official Opposition into a position where—necessarily, if the process is successful—they will look as though they have committed a serious error of judgment.

Mr. Grieve: The hon. Gentleman is making a characteristically thoughtful contribution. Does he not agree that it would be dangerous if, for the sake of bipartisanship, hon. Members gave the impression that there is not a growing groundswell of considerable opposition to terrorist releases when they are not accompanied by moving the peace process on by degrees, as envisaged in the agreement? If we did that, would not we be sending the wrong message to those who must decommission if the agreement is to work?

Mr. Öpik: That is where we started. Although that is a fair summation of the Conservative position—the right hon. Member for Bracknell would agree with that—it is simply not where I stand. In such a sensitive debate, where so much more is conducted in private than in public, it is dangerous to throw the light of publicity on to the matter, especially at such a sensitive time.

We will see who is right in the course of events, but my judgment is that the motion makes it more difficult to achieve the very things that all hon. Members believe are vital to future long-lasting and consolidated peace in the Province. The issue is one of judgment. It was dangerous to bring the matter up in such a way, but it would be crass foolishness to push the motion to a vote. If it is voted on, we shall vote for the Government amendment, not for the Conservative motion.

It is always worth remembering that it is not bad faith that secures peace. I would like more of that from some quarters of the Chamber in the crucial months to come.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: There is limited time for the debate. I must appeal for brief speeches, otherwise people will be disappointed.

5.52 pm

Ms Helen Southworth (Warrington, South): Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall take account of your guidance.

Like other hon. Members, I regret the decision of the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) to lend his name to this attempt by some, although by no means all, Opposition Members to rewrite the Belfast agreement. I take hope from the thought that, at some points, there have been only three Conservative Back Benchers present to listen to, and participate in, the debate.

Like most hon. Members and people across these islands, I shared the joy of the people of Northern Ireland on Good Friday, when agreement was reached after long and difficult negotiations. On 22 May, while people in northern and southern Ireland were voting overwhelmingly to support the agreement, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland was in my constituency, unveiling a sign for peace on the site of Warrington's international peace centre. She saw and shared the hope that people in Warrington have for the agreement.

While the people of Northern Ireland are working to implement the detail of the agreement, it would be dreadful if there were political opportunism and cherry-picking by hon. Members—looking for differences and exaggerating them, and stirring the pot for people's own narrow political interests. I hope that there will not be a vote on the motion.

As the voice of the people who elected me, I have a different story for hon. Members. Town centres are an economic key and the heart of their local community. The all-party group on town centre management, which is the largest after the beer club, is meeting in Westminster today. It is about normal society, as is recognised by all hon. Members.

The Warrington bombing by the IRA five years ago took two young lives and ripped the heart out of our town centre and our community. They were two more lives to add to more than 3,500 stolen by the conflict during the past three decades. It brought home to me and to many people in Warrington the fact that ordinary daily life in Northern Ireland was conducted in an environment of terror and threats of violence.

We desire to build reconciliation—a bridge. The word "bridge" means a lot in Warrington, because the bomb went off in Bridge street. We are trying to build a bridge with ordinary people in Northern Ireland, whose experience of terror we have shared directly. We have been building relationships. The Tim Parry scholarship has organised exchange visits for children, who learn about each other's cultures and communities. There are relationships between schools, and we have held sporting events with people from northern and southern Ireland. People have been getting together and enjoying themselves.

Warrington male voice choir has developed a programme, working with people in Belfast and in southern Ireland and bringing music and harmony across the islands, and so many people have given so much support to the Tim Parry and Johnathan Ball international peace centre. This has been about ordinary people, business sponsorship, raffles and sponsored walks. People across the north-west are investing time, money and energy in building friendships and breaking down barriers.

Last weekend, I had the great pleasure of visiting Belfast and Omagh—town centres that have been torn by violence in the past—with Colin and Wendy Parry, a civic party from Warrington and the male voice choir, which was participating in Christmas concerts. The discussions between civic leaders were of the kind that take place everywhere. They were about economic investment, growing small business, supporting women and helping them into business and sharing information about practical things, such as street furniture and arts centres, which are important for civic life.

The Belfast choir was spectacular—it was a wonderful concert—and the Royal Ulster Constabulary and Garda combined band was really good. There were more than

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500 young people, from the north and the south and across cultural and religious groups. They worked hard and they sang well. They were exceptional, not because they came from north and south and from across different cultural groups, but in the excellence of their singing. They showed the future for Northern Ireland. Those children are exceptional because they have worked hard and have achieved something—they were celebrating it together.

It is the Christmas season. Madam Speaker held a service in Westminster Hall today, and that is the normal way to behave in this season—"sweet singing in the choir". The Omagh community choir sang "Across the Bridge of Hope" in Omagh and in Belfast. I am going to quote parts of it that the choir pointed out to me. *[Interruption.]* I honestly do not care whether Opposition Members are going to listen to this, because many other people will listen and give it their support.

For many people, "Across the Bridge of Hope" is the peace process. It says:

"For many hands have fashioned it, imperfect it may be

But strong enough for plenty with support from you and me".

The choir also sang:

"When history dictates, mistrust may just be vanity".

Those are children's words, and it is important for adults to listen to children at any time—especially children from Omagh, who need us to hear what they are saying.

I want to tell Opposition Members a brief story about an exhibition on racism in Chicago. Two doors led into the exhibition, one saying "Prejudiced" and another saying "Unprejudiced". People chose which one to go through. When a person from Chicago was telling me this story, I said that I would go through the door saying "Unprejudiced". She said, "You wouldn't be able to, because it doesn't open. There is no such thing as a person without prejudice." I ask Opposition Members to learn from the past and to focus on the future, because it is our responsibility to create a better future. They should think carefully about how they will do that.

Tomorrow, the next part of the "out of darkness comes light" programme will take place in Omagh. It will include children's story-telling for Christmas. The 500 children in the Belfast choir sang a Slade song, "Merry Christmas everybody". It is a Christmas party song that people dance to, the chorus of which goes:

"So here it is, Merry Christmas.

Everybody's having fun.

Look to the future now.

It's only just begun."

As politicians, as civic leaders and as adults—we are adults—we have the responsibility and opportunity to ensure that the children of these islands have a peaceful Christmas and many happy and prosperous new years. I hope that we take that opportunity.

6.1 pm

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): I regret that, because of the brevity of the debate, it will not be possible for those who come from Northern Ireland to speak with the depth of knowledge that years of experience of terrorism has given them. I do not want to be offensive, but the hon. Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth) made about the most patronising speech that I have ever heard in the House.

I am a Northern Ireland Member, and I have been in the House for almost 16 years. Having lived most of my life in Northern Ireland, I cannot ignore the fact that the Conservative party, which tabled the motion, let down the people of Northern Ireland during its 18 years in government. It undermined the foundations on which political progress and peace could have been built long before now. It is heartbreaking to realise that the present Government, after being in opposition for so long, are making exactly the same mistakes.

I shall remind the official Opposition of the mistakes they made. There was the folly of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, which was imposed on the people of Northern Ireland without their consent, and without any consideration of their wishes. It was one of the greatest boosts that terrorism ever had in the 30 years to which the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) referred. Those of us who understand the nature of terrorism remember the words of Danny Morrison, the publicity spokesman for Sinn Fein and IRA member, who talked about an Armalite and ballot box strategy.

One of the problems that my colleagues and I have faced over the years is the fact that both main parties in turn—as they have been in government—have pandered to those who can bring the greatest force to bear in Northern Ireland. That is what the Anglo-Irish Agreement did. Baroness Thatcher now admits that she was wrong to introduce that agreement, but she did so because she could not tolerate the level of violence in Northern Ireland. Whatever her motives, the naivety of that agreement was experienced by all of us for a decade and longer.

The Conservative Government's other huge faux pas was the framework documents, which were predicated on the notion that the way to bring an end to violence in Northern Ireland was to harmonise the two political entities. That again undermined the framework on which those of us who care about political progress and peace hoped to build.

Now, in the most disingenuous manner, the present Northern Ireland Office team are undermining the Stormont agreement, for which many of us feel we paid a huge price. It is all very well for them to say that they support the letter of the Stormont agreement, but every action currently taken by the Northern Ireland Office team undermines the confidence of the greater number of people within both traditions in Northern Ireland. *[Interruption.]* I am glad that the Minister responsible for security, the hon. Member for East Kilbride (Mr. Ingram), has arrived, and feels that it is incumbent on him to mutter to colleagues on the Front Bench.

I shall give an example of the disingenuous approach taken by the Northern Ireland Office. In the light of the continuing threat, I recently asked the Secretary of State

"if she will identify those permanent security structures which are currently under consideration for demolition."

One would have thought that that list would be fairly short, given the danger to Northern Ireland as terrorists move, at their convenience, from one group to another—

as they change cap badges. What did the Minister, who is still muttering, have to say? He said:

"The Government are committed to returning Northern Ireland to normal policing and security arrangements as soon as it is safe to do so. This is clearly set out in the Good Friday Agreement. However, we can only move as fast as the security situation allows."—[*Official Report*, 18 November 1998; Vol. 319, c. *620*.]

The Minister says that we can only move as fast as the security situation allows. It might have increased my confidence and that of my constituents if he had had the guts to tell me that the Aughnacloy checkpoint is being demolished, as it is at present. A permanent, reinforced structure will not be replaced—God help us, if the violence starts again—yet one of the reassurances given by the Northern Ireland Office was that no irreversible steps would be taken to lessen security in Northern Ireland.

My party has co-operated with measures to remove troops from Northern Ireland, and with other steps that have been taken to achieve normality on the streets. We wanted that obligation to be honoured, but that has not happened. That is part of the difficulty we face.

I recently learned that the entire network of cross-border permanent checkpoints is under threat. I was told that they will not necessarily be removed after violence has been brought to an end and the guns and bombs have been decommissioned, but at an appropriate time in the medium term. That undermines the confidence of those of us in Northern Ireland who support the Stormont agreement, and who want that agreement to be implemented even-handedly.

One difficulty is that the victims of the IRA who are sitting on the Labour Benches are different from the victims whom I represent. They are the victims of IRA propaganda, who chunter words such as "preconditions". The Secretary of State says that there will be no preconditions. Well, there are no preconditions since the signing of the Stormont agreement, but there are post-conditions, and, as I think that the Secretary of State is beginning to understand—she certainly did not understand it at Northern Ireland questions last week, but I think she is beginning to understand it now—those are obligations: obligations that must be fulfilled.

Mr. Donaldson: My hon. Friend has mentioned the obligations placed on the Government. As he will know, the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 places a specific obligation on the Secretary of State, requiring her, among other things, to take into account whether organisations benefiting from prisoner releases are co-operating fully with the International Commission on Decommissioning. Does my hon. Friend agree that no such organisation is currently co-operating with the commission?

Mr. Maginnis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, which returns me to a point that I made earlier about the nature of terrorism and the Armalite-and-ballot-box policy of the IRA. It is a policy that has been recognised by other paramilitary groups. It means that a terrorist can go into hibernation in terms of the Armalite, but can continue to undermine society by exploiting the political process. The Government are not, at this stage, dealing with that effectively.

If we are to make progress, we must understand what the IRA is trying to achieve. What will happen if the IRA can achieve the full release of prisoners, and a place within the Administration—the Executive—which will, in turn, enable it to discredit the Government? I shall remind the House shortly of the original position of the House in terms of disarmament; but, if the IRA can discredit the Government, with the guns still in place it can threaten society. As many speakers have pointed out today, we will then be asked, "Are you going to give up this armed peace for a real war?"

What does an armed peace—a phrase used by the Taoiseach of the Irish Republic, Bertie Ahern—offer a people in a democracy? Nothing, except exploitation by those who continue to threaten. There might just be an Omagh, an Enniskillen or a La Mon around the corner. Moreover, there is always the fallback that, if the Government show real commitment to real democracy, there might just be a Regent's park, a Canary wharf or a Warrington.

We know what blackmail is, because we have seen it for 30 years. It is being applied in terms of the work being done by the Independent Commission on Policing in Northern Ireland. We need only walk into a public meeting, as I did on Friday night, to see an entire bank of Sinn Fein-IRA members, well orchestrated—

Mr. McGrady: And Loyalists.

Mr. Maginnis: The hon. Gentleman is right to remind me of that, but I was talking about my constituency, which, as he knows, does not contain a very active Loyalist terrorist element. The same is, of course, true of his constituency. In parts of the east of the Province, however, there they are—the Ulster Volunteer Force, the Ulster Defence Association and the rest.

At the meeting that I attended in Dungannon on Friday night, I observed that there were no ordinary members of the hon. Gentleman's tradition in the hall. I was told that, if they had been present, they would not have dared to open their mouths. A member of the IRA—the father of the late commanding officer in Dungannon, who was shot at Loughgall—read out his statement as though, somehow, he had been a victim of violence. The wife of one of the Ballygawley bus bombers explained how she had been a victim of the security forces.

The event was orchestrated to the last degree. A schoolmaster—a member of my tradition—made an even-handed and constructive contribution, and, after church on Sunday morning, I congratulated him on it. He—a man in his mid-sixties, who is well respected in the community—told me, "I found it very difficult, because I did not know whether that was a brick through my window or something worse, and I could not be sure what I was doing to my family." That is the extent of the intimidation that is occurring as the commission tries to fulfil its obligation to society in Northern Ireland. There is no balance.

It really is time that Northern Ireland Ministers went out and met IRA propaganda head on. It is time that they took the trouble to prove that the IRA is incorrect in saying, "There is no tradition of disarmament. Where did you ever hear of disarmament taking place where there has been a civil conflict?" I could name El Salvador, the Lebanon, Mozambique, Guatemala and, currently, Colombia. Disarmament is taking place as a result of political agreements that are being honoured by some of the most callous militias and other terrorist groups; why

[Mr. Maginnis]

should Northern Ireland be any different? Why should the Secretary of State baulk at the idea that to meet Sinn Fein-IRA and other paramilitary organisations head on is somehow to leave us in a worse position than we are in now?

The people of Northern Ireland, more than 70 per cent. of whom voted in favour of the Stormont agreement, do not expect to be betrayed, but they feel that the Government, and, in particular, the Northern Ireland Office, have been equivocal and evasive. I do not know why the Prime Minister does not step in as he did before 10 April, with the same enthusiasm and gusto, and reassure the people; someone must meet that obligation.

I will end with that thought, as others wish to speak.

6.19 pm

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): I intend to make the briefest speech in the debate, although I shall not resume my seat immediately.

I remind the hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) of a comment made by Senator Mitchell in his Dimbleby lecture last week:

"I am not objective. I'm deeply biased in favour of the people of Northern Ireland. Having spent nearly four years among them, I've come to like and admire them. While they can be quarrelsome and too quick to take offence, they are also warm and generous, energetic and productive."

I was prompted to make that comment by the hon. Gentleman's charmless response to the charming speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth).

I regret the motion. It is deeply unhelpful. I readily say that, when we have our debates, the exchanges with the right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) are always civil-minded and courteous. Despite that courtesy and civil-mindedness, he has made a grave error of judgment in tabling the motion at this moment.

It is right and proper that the Opposition offer tough-minded and legitimate criticisms of Government policy, even where, broadly, we have the same aspirations. I say the same to the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). He, too, was right to say that it is entirely legitimate to be tough-minded in response to a Government's policies. Labour Members were the same when we occupied the Opposition Benches. It will be many years before we are back there, but that is another story.

Similarly, I thought that the right hon. Member for North–West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) offered a fair-minded intervention on my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. It was characteristically honest. Hon. Members will recall that he said that the subject is deeply divisive and the problem complicated and almost intractable, but, again, that he was right to offer criticisms of the Government. That is the duty of the Opposition, but the motion is a mistake.

I remind the House of something else that Senator George Mitchell said the other day:

"This week I met in Cork with the Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, and in Belfast with the leaders of the new Northern Ireland Assembly and the political parties. As you know, so far they have been unable to resolve issues relating to formation of the executive and the decommissioning of arms. There is uneasiness among some about the continuing release of prisoners."

I suspect that some hon. Members would say that that is an understatement.

Senator Mitchell went on:

"Next year there will be further controversy when reports are received from the independent commission on policing and the criminal justice system. Policing is especially sensitive. Chris Patten and his colleagues on that commission have an important and difficult task."

I, along with other hon. Members of committee A of the British-Irish Inter-Parliamentary Body, will meet Chris Patten on Monday in this building.

Senator Mitchell said—here he cannot be accused of understatement:

"It will take extraordinary determination and commitment to get safely through all of these problems. But I believe it can be done and will be done. It would be an immense tragedy were the process to fail now. The British and Irish Governments and the political leaders of Northern Ireland have come too far to let peace slip away."

He is absolutely right. We have known all along that decommissioning would be the most difficult question to address and to settle, but with patient, painstaking negotiations, and with the intervention of General de Chastelain and his colleagues, much can be achieved over the next 16 to 17 months.

I remain—like Senator Mitchell, I like to think—a warm friend of the people of Northern Ireland, and optimistic that the painstaking negotiations can bring about the outcome that all of us want. There is too much pessimism on those matters among hon. Members on the Opposition Benches. I should like to see more optimism and more faith in the people who are at the forefront of the endeavours.

I fully support what the Secretary of State is doing, and I am not being encouraged by—

Mr. Paterson: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Dr. Godman: Sit down.

I am not being encouraged by active Parliamentary Private Secretaries, or even tough—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I hope that the hon. Gentleman was not addressing that remark to the Chair.

Dr. Godman: I would not dare, Sir. I was just asking someone across the way—certainly not you—to sit down.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman must know that matters of order are for the Chair and not for him.

Dr. Godman: I take that stricture, and apologise to you, Sir.

The Secretary of State's position is absolutely right on the issue. We should vote against the motion, and support the Government.

6.26 pm

Mr. Andrew Hunter (Basingstoke): I shall be as brief as possible.

I have a facsimile of the letter that the Prime Minister wrote in his hand on 20 May. It is headed:

"My pledge to the people of Northern Ireland."

There are five pledges. The last two are worthy of consideration:

"Those who use or threaten violence excluded from the Government of Northern Ireland",

and

"Prisoners kept in unless violence is given up for good"—

some pledges.

The fact that this debate is taking place is testimony to the fact that promises have been broken and trust betrayed. If the Prime Minister had kept his word—the word that he spoke at Balmoral on 14 May and repeated in the hand-written letter of 20 May, in the letter that was published in the *News Letter* and *Irish Independent* on referendum day and referred to on many occasions in the House, in particular on 6 May—there would be no need for this debate, but the Prime Minister and the Government have not kept their word. They have not honoured their pledge. The Government have betrayed the trust of the people of Northern Ireland and broken promises that were made to them.

Few people, if any, deny that many Unionists voted yes on referendum day and for pro-agreement candidates in the Assembly elections because the Government had promised—so those Unionists understood—that there would be a direct link between decommissioning and early release, and between decommissioning and places on the Executive.

Mr. Wilshire: Like me, my hon. Friend was in Northern Ireland recently—we were at the same place. Did he hear what I heard on that occasion—a significant number of Unionists saying that they had voted yes in the referendum to give the process a chance, but felt utterly betrayed and that they were now being sold out through appeasement, which was going to get them nowhere?

Mr. Hunter: I do recall that powerful occasion and endorse what my hon. Friend has said. One reason why those people said that was because they perhaps remembered the exchange in the House on 6 May 1998, when my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition asked the Prime Minister if he agreed that

"prisoners should not be released early until the organisations to which they belong have substantially decommissioned their weapons".—[*Official Report*, 6 May; Vol. 311, c. 711.]

Audio recordings of our proceedings confirm that the Prime Minister replied:

"The answer to your question is, yes, of course".

He went on further and applied it. He said:

"both in respect of taking seats in the government of Northern Ireland and the early release of prisoners"—

no ifs, no buts, unequivocal, unambiguous. The Prime Minister in this Chamber said, "No early release, no places on the Executive without decommissioning."

The second episode worth remembering is the letter that the Prime Minister wrote to two Northern Ireland newspapers, which was printed on 22 May. It said:

"There can be no accelerated prisoner release unless organisations and individuals concerned have clearly given up violence for good."

That has not happened. The violence continues. There has been no let-up since the agreement, but the prisoners are coming out.

The Prime Minister continued:

"Representatives of parties intimately linked to paramilitary groups can only be in a future Northern Ireland Government if it is clear that there will be no more violence and the threat of violence has gone. That does not just mean decommissioning, but all bombings, killings, beatings, an end to targeting, recruiting and all the structures of terrorism."

Thankfully, the terrorists have pressed the pause button on the bombings, but they retain the capability to resume them whenever they want. Meanwhile, the killings, beatings, targeting and recruiting continue and the structures of terrorism remain intact.

Mr. Peter Robinson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, in particular because the majority of Unionists on the Opposition Benches voted against the Belfast agreement, but it looks as though none of us will be called to speak in the debate. May I draw the hon. Gentleman's attention to the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998, which relates decommissioning to the release of prisoners? It was a Government proposal, which was enacted by the House. Under that measure, the Secretary of State has powers to stop prisoners being released because decommissioning has not taken place.

Mr. Hunter: The hon. Gentleman is correct.

Finally, since 1 November—a mere five weeks—there have been 29 exiles, 11 shootings and 15 beatings in Northern Ireland and 138 people have been the victims of intimidation of a different nature. The Ulster Defence Association, the Ulster Volunteer Force and the IRA have all been involved in that grisly catalogue of mental and physical torture. Meanwhile, the obscene process of early release continues. The Prime Minister said:

"There can be no accelerated prisoner releases unless organisations and individuals concerned have clearly given up violence for good."

What was intended to be a peace process, long ago turned into a shameful process of appeasement. Labour Members say that there would have been no agreement without early release. So be it. A civilised society has core values, which include the rule of law and a judicial system that is independent of political interference. Neither exists in Northern Ireland—they died with the agreement.

6.32 pm

Mr. Malcolm Moss (North–East Cambridgeshire): The wording of the motion was carefully drafted, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) pointed out. The first part includes three comments that were made by the Prime Minister: the first at Balmoral on 14 May 1998; the second from *Hansard* on 20 April 1998; in response to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition; and the third in a response at Prime Minister's Question Time on 6 May. I shall read the last of the three quotations:

"The only organisations that can qualify to take seats in the government of Northern Ireland and can expect the early release of prisoners are those that have given up violence for good".

In another answer, he said

"Decommissioning is part of that".—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1998; Vol. 311, c. 711.]

[Mr. Malcolm Moss]

Listening to the views of the Government this evening, I find it extremely difficult to understand how they can oppose their own Prime Minister's words. We are asking that those pledges—given not only on those three occasions, but consistently throughout the past seven months—should be honoured.

We have been consistent in our approach to the issues. In May, the Leader of the Opposition put the salient points to the Prime Minister. We are returning to the theme this evening because we are unhappy at developments, as is obvious from comments made in the debate by Conservative Members in particular, by those who favoured the Belfast agreement and were a party to it, and by those with a vested interest in the future of Northern Ireland.

There is no break in the bipartisan approach. Nor do we seek to oppose or rewrite the agreement, as many Labour Members reading the Whip's notes are told to ask. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) said in his most telling contribution, hon. Members have a right to debate and to express opinions in the House, and not merely the opinions of Members, who have their own worries and considerations on the matter, but those of many people in Northern Ireland. I would go further. We also have a duty to express the fears, worries and concerns of the electorate we represent. This matter does not pertain merely to Northern Ireland. The entire United Kingdom electorate has a definite view of the situation. My right hon. Friend said that, to date, Government statements from the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister have been entirely admirable and I agree, but he went on, tellingly, to say that he believed that, so far, the giving had been one-sided.

On the views of our electorate on the mainland of Britain, I refer the House to a Gallup poll that was printed in *The Daily Telegraph* a few weeks ago on Friday 6 November. The article, which was written by Anthony King, who is Professor of Government at Essex University and a well-known authority on these matters, stated:

"There is overwhelming hostility to the early release of convicted terrorist prisoners. In the view of three quarters of Britons, prisoner releases should be halted until all terrorist weapons have been decommissioned.

Gallup's data shows large numbers of voters are uneasy about some of the Blair Government's actions in connection with peace negotiations . . . Only 21 per cent. of people in Britain believe that the IRA 'has permanently renounced terrorism' and all but a tiny minority believe that terrorist organisations should be required to decommission all their weapons at once.

The majority view is that weapons decommissioning should be complete before any further concessions are made to Sinn Fein and the IRA. Seventy per cent. are hostile to Sinn Fein joining any new devolved government in Northern Ireland pending the surrender of weapons and even more, 74 per cent., opposed further prisoner releases until the same condition is met."

Ms Moran: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Moss: We are running short of time, so if the hon. Lady does not mind, I will make progress.

In this House, we have a responsibility to represent the views of the electorate on the mainland of Great Britain. On prisoner release, it is time that we shot the fox that appears in every debate on the subject, probably due to the Labour Whip's notes. There is a fundamental difference between the prisoner releases that took place under the previous Government and those that are taking place now. That difference has been reiterated this evening and I shall explain it again so that, in future, Labour Members will tell their Whips, "No, we've had that debate", and say that they do not need that piece of paper any more.

Under the previous Government, no life prisoners had their sentences reduced. When there was a ceasefire, some concessions were made in the negotiations, but we simply resumed remission levels of 50 per cent., as they had dropped to one third when we faced increased violence. That is the position on prisoner release under the previous Government, so let us have no more red herrings.

The argument of the Secretary of State seemed to hinge on the definition of a ceasefire. She referred to the agreement and the linkage between prisoner release and a ceasefire and prisoner release and decommissioning. To return to the Prime Minister's statement on 6 May, which was:

"It is essential that organisations that want to benefit from the early release of prisoners should give up violence. Decommissioning is part of that, of course".—[*Official Report*, 6 May 1998; Vol. 311, c. 711.]

I simply do not understand how, on the one hand we can talk about a ceasefire, and on the other reject the definition of giving up violence for good. Only last week, during Northern Ireland Question Time the Secretary of State said:

"I am not saying . . . that decommissioning should wait until last. We want it to happen as soon as possible and it is an essential part of the agreement. It is not a precondition but an obligation."—[*Official Report*, 2 December 1998; Vol. 321, c. 873.]

She repeated the word "obligation" this evening.

If it is an obligation, why was the right hon. Lady unable to answer my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg) when he asked her not once, not twice, but three times the fundamental and crucial question that we posed on other occasions and again tonight: is it possible that all the prisoners could be released with no weapons or explosives having been decommissioned? Perhaps she will answer yes or no in her reply to the debate so that we can have it on record.

The hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) said that there was not a time scale but a time limit. The agreement talks in terms of a two-year limit. Are we suggesting that, at the end of two years, if prisoner release continues at its present rate, it is likely that all the prisoners will be out? Are we saying, and are the hon. Member for South Down and the Secretary of State saying, that it is highly possible that, at the end of two years, all the prisoners will have been released with no decommissioning at all having taken place? That is the fundamental question. It has been posed on many occasions and we have never received an answer.

The motion has been criticised by the Liberal Democrats. Would not the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) like an answer to that question? Does he know the answer? If he does, perhaps he will intervene. We would like an answer and that is why we tabled the motion. Indeed, that is why we shall vote on it. However, if as we expect, it is defeated, we shall not oppose the amended motion that may come in its wake.

6.42 pm

Marjorie Mowlam: With the leave of the House I shall respond to the debate. As I said at the start, it has provided a welcome opportunity to examine the progress that we are making on the Good Friday agreement. Right hon. and hon. Members on both sides of the House have acknowledged that progress is more rapid in some areas than in others. Whether we are talking about the shadow executive, the shadow assembly, the north-south implementation bodies, the north-south ministerial council, human rights, the Equality Commission, decommissioning, prisoner releases, the police or criminal justice reviews, we need to make progress on all those fronts together if the Good Friday agreement is to succeed.

The right hon. Member for Bracknell (Mr. MacKay) must accept that, while a complete and unequivocal ceasefire is being maintained—he agrees that it is—the agreement requires that prisoner releases continue. He cannot say that he supports the agreement and then refuse to accept what the parties actually agreed. The right hon. Gentleman may be able to live with that contradiction in opposition, but the Government must remain consistent with the agreement.

The hon. Members for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) and for North–East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Moss) quoted my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and myself extensively. The Prime Minister's pledges and my statements are compatible with the agreement. The Opposition motion is not and that is why we cannot support it. Our position is clear. Progress needs to be made on all aspects of the Good Friday agreement. Earlier in the debate, I accepted that progress had been uneven. The answer is not to slow down on the issues on which progress has been made, but to speed up progress on the rest and eliminate the inequality. People need time and space to implement the agreement and the fact that they are being harried as a result of tonight's debate will achieve nothing.

I echo the comments by the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) about punishment beatings, or mutilations as he referred to them. I keep the matter under continuous review, particularly after the events at the weekend with the Loyalist Volunteer Force. Next week, I shall meet all the parties attached to paramilitary groups to discuss precisely that issue as it is of deep concern to us.

I thank the hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) and the right hon. Members for North–West Cambridgeshire (Sir B. Mawhinney) and for Bridgwater (Mr. King) for their speeches, which were honest and tried to show the complexity of the situation that they faced in government and some of the current difficulties. As two out of those three said, we would like more and quicker progress, but we can move only as quickly as the political leaders in the talks process. We shall do everything we can to encourage and facilitate that.

Several Opposition Members, particularly the hon. Member for North–East Cambridgeshire, said that the House was being denied the right to debate the issue. Of course it is not. However, if hon. Members vote for the motion, they will be voting to rewrite the Good Friday agreement and that cannot be done.

The hon. Member for Fermanagh and South Tyrone (Mr. Maginnis) raised a specific point about Aughnacloy. All normalisation measures are taken on the advice of the Chief Constable and I can assure the hon. Gentleman that he guards his independence jealously and makes his own decisions. The demolition of the permanent vehicle checkpoint at Aughnacloy was his decision based on his professional judgment. Far from concealing it, the decision was announced on 20 September, but had been in the public domain for some weeks. Any future de-escalation measures will also be based on security advice.

Mr. Maginnis: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Marjorie Mowlam: I must make progress as time is short.

The hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Mr. Donaldson) asked about the timetable for prisoner releases. The timetable for the accelerated release of prisoners is the responsibility of the Sentence Review Commission, acting in accordance with the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act. He asked, as did the right hon. and learned Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Mr. Hogg), whether all prisoners will be out in two years' time. The short answer is no. Many will still be in prison and the date is reviewable if progress is not made. Difficulties will arise if there is not sufficient confidence for progress to be made on all parts of the agreement before then.

Mr. Maginnis: Will the Secretary of State give way on that point?

Marjorie Mowlam: I have made it clear to the hon. Gentleman that I am not giving way.

As I said earlier, I welcome the debate. It is right that we record what progress is being made on the Good Friday agreement. There is a long way to go, but the talks are continuing and I believe that the will is there to reach an agreement. Of course people on both sides are scared of the present position. They fear that progress is being stalled. It is a genuine fear that is common to both communities, but people are even more anxious that progress will not be made and that the process will move backwards. That is why I appeal to all those involved in the talks and all those holding positions of authority in Northern Ireland to do all that they can to make progress on all aspects of the Good Friday agreement.

When one talks to people in Northern Ireland, they express a lack of confidence in the agreement. However, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington, South (Ms Southworth) who mentioned their desire for normality. Despite the rude comments from Opposition Members, I agree with what she said about those in Warrington who suffered in the same way as people in Northern Ireland. I do not think that we should discuss whether a life lost in Northern Ireland is of more or less value than a life lost in Warrington or Canary wharf. We in the House treat the deaths of people and the sadness that it produces with equal seriousness and determination to ensure that progress is made. Therefore, I ask the House to support the Government amendment tonight and vote against the Opposition motion.

6.50 pm

Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson (Lagan Valley): I want to bring again to the attention of the House what is in the agreement. We have had a lot of discussion tonight about that. Let us look at what it contains on the release of prisoners. It says clearly:

"Prisoners affiliated to organisations which have not established or are not maintaining a complete and unequivocal ceasefire will not benefit from the arrangements."

That is the arrangements for prisoner release. It is beyond doubt that the organisations at present benefiting from the arrangements are not maintaining a complete and unequivocal ceasefire. Those ceasefires are being breached. Complete and unequivocal surely should mean an end to violence—that violence is not being perpetrated by those organisations.

As other right hon. and hon. Members have said, Families Against Intimidation and Terror, an independent organisation partly funded by the very Government whose task it is to oversee the release of prisoners, has demonstrated that all these organisations are engaged in violence. They are breaching their ceasefires on a regular basis. I do not see how the Government can claim that the organisations benefiting from the release of their terrorist prisoners are maintaining a complete and unequivocal ceasefire. Surely "unequivocal" means that there is no equivocation on the question of violence. Yet the statistics for the last month alone clearly demonstrate that all those organisations that the Secretary of State has deemed to be maintaining a complete and unequivocal ceasefire are continuing to engage in acts of violence.

Mr. Maginnis: Does my hon. Friend agree that, although the Secretary of State endeavours to evade her responsibilities by blaming the Chief Constable, the Chief Constable was unequivocal in pointing his finger after the Belfast-Donegal Celtic football team affair? He made it clear that the Provisional IRA had intimidated the members of that team into changing their decision.

Mr. Donaldson: I am glad that my hon. Friend has made that point. It refers to an issue that was pointed up by Government Members when they talked about the new change happening in Northern Ireland. The hon. Member for South Down (Mr. McGrady) talked about the new changes. Yes, there are new changes, but unfortunately some of the mindsets have not changed. The action of Sinn Fein-IRA in dealing with the Donegal—*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members may think that it is funny that footballers who want to play a game of football are intimidated. I do not think that it is funny and neither do the footballers or the members of the Donegal Celtic football club. If the hon. Member for Carlisle (Mr. Martlew) wishes to intervene, I will give way to him, but since he remains seated it is obvious—

Mr. McCabe: Am I right in thinking that, in condemning intimidation, the hon. Gentleman is even handed and also condemns the outrageous intimidation at Drumcree and the outrageous attacks on the RUC in the past week, which the Chief Constable has condemned?

Mr. Donaldson: Indeed, without any equivocation, I condemn all acts of violence against the RUC or any person in Northern Ireland. My record on condemning violence is there for anyone to check. It has been consistent.

In reference to the Donegal Celtic affair, the IRA is not maintaining a complete and unequivocal ceasefire. When it signed up to the agreement, Sinn Fein said that it was committed to exclusively peaceful and democratic means. How can it be democratic when it intimidates and sets about beating people up and shooting them?

Ms Moran: I acknowledge the violence that the hon. Gentleman describes, but does he agree with the comments of Senator George Mitchell at the Richard Dimbleby lecture? He said:

"But to succumb to the temptation to retaliate would give the criminals what they want: escalating sectarian violence and the end of the peace process."

Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are in grave danger of giving the terrorists what they want by trying to dismember the Northern Ireland agreement, as the motion attempts to do? Does he agree that it would be better if we acknowledged the more than 71 per cent. support for the whole of the agreement and did not divide the House on such an important issue so that we could make progress?

Mr. Donaldson: No one is talking about retaliation by the use of violence and intimidation. May I quote to the hon. Lady the words of one Donegal Celtic footballer? He said:

"we all received the phone threats and we know who threatened us. In fact he was only released from jail recently. That is why we took the threat so seriously because we all knew who this man was and what he was capable of."

This man is the sort of person who is being released from prison and engaging in intimidation. According to Families Against Intimidation and Terror, a number of prisoners have been involved in so-called punishment attacks. Yet the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 says that they must refrain from violence. There is a lot of duplicity here.

When we talk about the agreement, let us also talk about the legislation that has been passed by the House, namely, the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act. People ask where is the link between decommissioning and prisoner releases. It is in the law passed by this House. A link has been created between the release of prisoners and decommissioning. The Act that this House passed and the Government proposed says:

"The Secretary of State shall in particular take into account whether an organisation. . . is co-operating fully with any Commission of the kind referred to in section 7 of the Northern Ireland Arms Decommissioning Act 1997".

In my opinion, none of the organisations benefiting from prisoner releases are co-operating fully with that commission. Some of them have not even appointed a liaison officer to the international commission.

What I and the decent people of Northern Ireland, including those who voted for the agreement, want to know is when the Secretary of State will fulfil the obligations placed on her by the House and ensure that those organisations benefiting from prisoner releases start to co-operate fully with the international commission and

that we start to make progress on the question of arms. There is a link between decommissioning and prisoner releases. Tenuous though it may be, it is there. The Government are under an obligation to ensure that we make progress on decommissioning. As the Opposition say, if we do not, the Government have to review the question of prisoner releases. There cannot be a blank cheque.

One Labour Member talked about turning the key. The problem for many people in Northern Ireland is that the key that is being turned is the key to the cells in the Maze prison and that prisoners are being let out. Nothing is being given in response by terrorist organisations by way of decommissioning and an end to violence, threats, punishment beatings, shootings and maimings. All those things continue and have increased since the agreement was signed. That is not an end to violence. It is not peace. It is intimidation and violence and, for as long as it continues, the Government must review the whole question of prisoner releases.

6.59 pm

Mr. MacKay *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put accordingly, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 142, Noes 376.

Division No. 19] **[6.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Cash, William
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maginnis, Ken
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Nigel Waterson and
Mr. Stephen Day.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Canavan, Dennis
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*

Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dafis, Cynog
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Doug *(Newcastle N)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
Mclsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Read, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*

Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:

Mr. Keith Hill and

Mr. Greg Pope.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 352, Noes 7.

Division No. 20] **[7.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene (Paisley N)
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blair, Rt Hon Tony
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Cleland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hinchliffe, David
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGrady, Eddie
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Mowlam, Rt Hon Marjorie
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Purchase, Ken

Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Keith Hill and
Mr. Greg Pope.

NOES

Beggs, Roy
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Forsythe, Clifford
McCartney, Robert (N Down)
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Robinson, Peter *(Belfast E)*
Thompson, William

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. William Ross and
Rev. Martin Smyth.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House recognises that the Good Friday Agreement represents an historic opportunity to bring agreed government and political stability to Northern Ireland; acknowledges the progress which has been made by the British and Irish Governments and the Northern Ireland parties in reaching and implementing the Agreement; and believes the only way forward for the people of Northern Ireland to find lasting peace is for the Governments and the parties to move urgently to implement every aspect of the Agreement in full.

Mr. Winnick: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In view of the excellent decision on Pinochet, which has delighted all those who believe in the rule of international law, is the matter still sub judice? Has anything changed? If it is no longer sub judice, we would like to have the opportunity to congratulate the Home Secretary on a decision that we believe to be absolutely right.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In view of the possibly irreparable damage that has been done to our relations with a friendly democratic country, will the Foreign Secretary come to the House and make a statement?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The matter is still sub judice and this is not the time to discuss it.

Tax Harmonisation

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Micheal Lord): We now come to the debate on tax harmonisation. Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the Prime Minister.

7.25 pm

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): I beg to move,

That this House deplores the Government's attempts to be all things to all men on the issue of EU tax harmonisation; urges the Government to explain what confidence can be placed in Ministers' undertakings to use the veto, given the Chancellor's decision to sign up to the Party of European Socialists' "New European Way" document and given the EU Tax Commissioner's insistence that the UK is "fully on board" for progress towards tax harmonisation; asks the Government to place in the Library the list of 85 instances of alleged "harmful tax competition" identified by the Code of Conduct Working Group chaired by the Financial Secretary, ten of which are believed to relate to the UK; and urges the Government to make a clear statement of its policy towards EU tax harmonisation.

The House will wish to join me in expressing sympathy to the Chancellor and his family on their recent bereavement, which is the reason for his absence. We all want to send our condolences to him on that sad event.

The issue that we are discussing tonight sums up so much of what is wrong with the Government. On issue after issue, they try to have it both ways. In Europe, Ministers signed "The New European Way" and Commissioner Monti said that the United Kingdom is fully on board for the Commission's tax proposals, but those Ministers come back here and talk tough about using the veto. It is significant that such talk is always surrounded by weasel words that give them a let out for later.

The Government are starting to find that they cannot fool all of the people all the time. Sooner or later, decisions have to be made. Many of the tax harmonisation issues will come to a head in the next six months, so the Government need to make a clear statement of where they stand. They have an opportunity to do so today. The time for weasel words is over.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Sit down then.

Mr. Maude: I suspect that that comment is the peak of wit from those on the Government Benches. Judges used to ask, "Is that your best point?"; I suspect that it probably was.

I ask the Chief Secretary to address the chief issues and to have another crack at answering the question that we asked him last week, which he signally failed to answer: do the Government believe that the single currency requires tax harmonisation? It is not compulsory to believe that; plenty of people do not. Last week, however, the Chief Secretary provided two answers. First, he shook his head and then he nodded it. One can select the answer that one thinks is most appropriate. Let us see whether he can do any better today. I am watching him very carefully and he is not moving at all. He has had a week to think about the question, so when he makes his speech, he should answer it.

The Minister's colleagues on the continent think that economic and monetary union requires a degree of tax harmonisation. The German Finance Minister, Mr. Lafontaine, has said that the unified currency area needs a fair and equal tax framework.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Maude: I do not know whether Labour Members have the same list of interventions as they had last week, but on this occasion they have not done us the courtesy of supplying it in advance. Perhaps we can hear the first one now.

Mr. James Plaskitt (Warwick and Leamington): How assiduous was the right hon. Gentleman in his campaign against tax harmonisation in 1992 when the Conservative Government signed up for minimum duty rates for alcohol, tobacco and fuel?

Mr. Maude: We always accepted that there was a case for minimal tax harmonisation. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members think that they have hit on something incredibly novel and miraculous, but it is perfectly well known that there was a case for minimal tax harmonisation for the development of the single market. We agreed to minimal movements, and that is simply a matter of history. Labour Members cannot wriggle away from the question that they now face; they are now the Government. The issue under consideration is a further programme of severe tax harmonisation in Europe. They have to answer the question. Do they support tax harmonisation or not? We are getting two different answers in two different places. They talk to their colleagues on the continent and clearly encourage them to believe that they are signed up to it; they then come back here and say something different.

If Labour Members spent any time talking to business men—now that the Paymaster General seems to be on his way out, there may be fewer opportunities for them to do so—they would find that business men are getting worried about the whole process. Because of the social chapter, they have already seen a levelling up of social and employment regulation, which has whittled away Britain's comparative advantage. Business men are beginning to see what would happen under the provisions to which the Government are committing themselves across the channel—they see the prospect of a levelling up of our taxation, which means the removal of exactly the things that have given Britain a comparative advantage in attracting investment.

Mr. Tom Levitt (High Peak): Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that the two instances of tax harmonisation that we have seen—the signing up to the abolition of duty free and the imposition of value added tax on fuel—took place under his Government?

Mr. Maude: The issues today—*[Laughter.]* The reality is that the Government cannot get to grips with the fact that they are now in power. They have custody of those matters and have to come clean with the country on what they are planning to do. It will not do to keep on using weasel words and failing to answer questions.

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maude: No, I shall continue. I suspect that Labour Members are simply reading from the same hymn sheet.

[Mr. Maude]

We now know that when one gives way to one Labour Back Bencher, one might as well give way to all of them as they all read from one list. We can take one as proxy for them all because they are clearly too stupid to think up questions for themselves.

Mrs. Angela Browning (Tiverton and Honiton): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for giving way—look, no list. Will he confirm that the reason that there was an agreement on duty free at the time by the previous Conservative Government was that it was conditional on the Commission's making a detailed analysis of how it would affect individual countries and on its then coming forward with a report? We have never had that report—the Commission failed in its duty.

Mr. Maude: There was not only a commitment to supply an economic impact report of the effects of abolition of duty free on various countries but a commitment to bring forward proposals for a successor regime. That has not been done. The Government have only just cottoned on to that, and I shall have something to say about that later.

Let us hear from the Chief Secretary whether he agrees with the German Finance Minister that the

"unified currency area needs a fair and equal tax framework".

Does he agree with the Austrian Finance Minister, who said that economic and monetary union will

"make it imperative to start co-ordinating the sphere of taxation. The social democrat governments"—

that is rather chilling—

"will also have to look at harmonising prices and wage policy"?

That is what some of the Chief Secretary's joint signatories to the "The New European Way" say, but we have not heard what the Chief Secretary and the Chancellor say. Let us hear it tonight.

We also need to hear about a related matter. Do the Government seriously believe in tax competition? We heard the Prime Minister claim that he believes in it—he said so today. One wonders whether he has read the excellent recent paper by Mr. Marsden called "Is Tax Competition Harmful?", an issue that should be exercising the Financial Secretary at this time.

Mr. Marsden points out that, while the European Union is tackling cartels and encouraging competition in other parts of the economy, the reverse is true in the case of taxation. He shows that low tax economies consistently out-perform higher tax economies. What does the Chief Secretary think? Does he agree?

If the Chief Secretary genuinely believes in tax competition, as the Prime Minister today claimed that he did, why, in the one sphere where convergence would benefit Britain—excise duties, which were mentioned earlier—has he reversed the gradual convergence of British levels of excise duty with those of our continental trading partners? He has not only abandoned it but reversed it, so the gap is widening to Britain's disadvantage.

As we are talking about tax competition, it is good that the Financial Secretary is responding to the debate. She has been a somewhat elusive figure recently. The Government have gone a bit quiet about it now but, a few months ago, they were boasting about the fact that the Financial Secretary had been selected to chair the working group on the code of conduct on harmful tax competition. The Government thought that that was a great triumph for Britain. They were bragging about it and saying that it was great news for us. They have gone a bit quieter recently because it has turned out to be rather controversial and, for the Financial Secretary, rather embarrassing.

The Financial Secretary's group, we read, has identified 85 instances of harmful tax competition, and 10 are said to relate to Britain. It would be lovely to hear her confirm or deny that. Those 10 items include tax breaks for the film industry, which were introduced by the Financial Secretary herself last year. Will she now publish the list of 85 instances of harmful tax competition? Is she prepared to publish it today so that the House can find out whether 10 such measures have been identified by her own working group? What is the Government's response? Is the Financial Secretary going to defend the very measures that she introduced last year but the group that she chairs has this year identified as being unacceptable? The country wants to know.

The Government spent a great deal of time last year boasting about what a wonderful scheme it was, about the jobs and investment that it would bring and the fact that it would revitalise the film industry in this country, but now the Financial Secretary says that it has to be scrapped. It was a bit short lived—what about all the long-termism that she has mentioned?

Mr. Paul Marsden (Shrewsbury and Atcham) *rose—*

Mr. Maude: This has turned into a short debate, which is a pity because it is on such an important subject. I must continue.

Will the Government publish an assessment of the impact of the removal of the 10 measures on jobs and investment? The film industry is important and we want to know about it, but what about shipping? What about the tax relief on reinvestment in ships, which the Labour party supported enthusiastically when it was introduced? That is apparently on the list and has to go.

The Financial Secretary must have been able to organise an assessment because she has been chairing the committee that has identified the problem. While she was doing that wearing one hat, presumably her officials in the Treasury could have been making an assessment of the impact on jobs and investment. The House wants to know.

Mr. Oliver Letwin (West Dorset): Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would also be useful if the Financial Secretary told the House why she told European Standing Committee B only a few months ago that the very committee that she was chairing would have no effect on domestic tax legislation? *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Maude: We hear from the Financial Secretary that it is apparently true that there will be no effect on Britain. I take that as a refutation of the suggestion that any of the 10 measures in question affect Britain. Will she confirm that?

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Dawn Primarolo): I shall speak later.

Mr. Maude: We shall be looking for a definitive answer then. From a sedentary position, she confirmed that what she said last year was absolutely true, so none of this affects Britain at all. Let us hear a definitive answer.

While we are on the subject of harmful tax competition, as it is called by the Labour Government and their European partners—

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge) *rose—*

Mr. Maude: I must continue. I cheerfully gave way to my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Mr. Letwin) because I know that he is capable of thinking up intelligent remarks for himself. We now know that Labour Members intervene only when comments have been handed out in written form beforehand.

Let us put paid to the idea that the Prime Minister again tried to put about at Question Time today, suggesting that the code of conduct on so-called harmful tax competition was produced under the previous Government. That is absolute rubbish—it was blocked when the previous Government were in office. It was signed up to by this Government. This Government thought that it was a great idea, and they signed up to it in December last year. Indeed, in announcing the decision, their press release said that Britain had signed up to the code of conduct "for the first time". They are condemned by their own mouth. Once again, the Prime Minister has given the House a misleading impression.

Mr. Ian Stewart: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maude: No, I shall continue. Giving way to the hon. Gentleman is very tempting, but I shall resist the temptation on this occasion.

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Byers) *rose—*

Mr. Maude: I shall give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Byers: It must be recorded that the group on the code of conduct was first discussed during the United Kingdom presidency of the European Union. Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that that was in November 1992, when the Conservatives were in office, and that they did nothing to block the proposal?

Mr. Maude: The proposal may have been discussed, but it was blocked while the Conservatives were in power. It was not signed until this Government were in office. They are condemned by the boast in their press release. It is very generous of them to want to share the credit, even though they tried to take it all for themselves when they announced the decision.

Mr. Byers: Once again, for the record, I refer to the ECOFIN meeting of 23 November 1992 and the agreement signed by the then Conservative Government. It was agreed that "the above criteria", which lists potential harmful tax matters, should be applied to the consideration of whether issues merit action and the level at which identified problems might be resolved, including those measures which are best taken on the basis of voluntary co-operative action. That is what the Conservatives agreed to during their EU presidency in 1992.

Mr. Maude: The more that the right hon. Gentleman reads out, the more it confirms the point. The Conservatives were committed to nothing in the nature of what this Government have signed up to. Britain signed up to such a damaging measure only when this Government came into office. They were then unwise enough to put the Financial Secretary in charge, with the result that the issue has come straight back like a boomerang, in condemnation of some of their very favourite measures.

Will the Chief Secretary spare us the weasel words that we have heard from him and his colleagues—*[Interruption.]* We have heard so much equivocation and qualification.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maude: I will not give way to the hon. Gentleman.

On this and related subjects, we need some straight answers. Last week, the Chief Secretary said:

"If necessary, we will be prepared to use our veto to protect the national interest."

That was a fudge. He cannot say when he will use the veto, what he is in favour of, or what he is against. He also said:

"if the draft directive on the withholding tax remains in its present form, we will veto that directive."—[*Official Report*, 1 December 1998; Vol. 321, c. 697-99.]

The directive will clearly not remain precisely in its present form. Will he veto the withholding tax? It is a very simple question. He cannot seek refuge, as he always does, in the qualification and equivocation that we have so much come to expect from the Government.

Will the Chief Secretary explain why, so very recently, but before all this subject became so controversial and uncomfortable for the Government, he and his colleagues were prepared to sign up to what amounted to a clear commitment in "The New European Way", which was launched with so much bragging, boasting and razzmatazz? We are told that that great document was drafted by the Chancellor's team in the Treasury. It is not for us to say whether its authorship, like another famous document, is "all Balls". The document states:

"We must make further progress in tax and benefit reform . . . by co-ordinating savings and corporate taxation".

We now know from what Mr. Lafontaine set out yesterday that, in Labour's lexicon, co-ordination of taxation and harmonisation of taxation are the same thing. The Government find co-ordination much less embarrassing to talk about—but the commitment is there.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Maude: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I shall continue.

[Mr. Maude]

Will the Chief Secretary explain—he has utterly failed to do so—why the Prime Minister, in his address to the French National Assembly earlier this year, was explicit in committing the Government to protecting the veto only in respect of personal taxation? Does the Chief Secretary accept that that shows that everything else is negotiable?

A few months later, the report of the Labour party's national policy forum on Europe, which was presented to the Labour party conference and formally adopted as party policy, narrowed down the area of tax policy even more. It talked of member states retaining control over only "personal tax rates". Today, the joint letter signed by the Prime Minister and Chancellor Schröder narrowed it down even more. That great document was supposed to get the Prime Minister out of the hole in which he has found himself on this issue—yet, it makes matters worse. It says:

"At no time have we considered measures to harmonise personal income tax".

The weaselling continues. First, the Prime Minister is protecting personal taxes, then personal tax rates. Now personal income tax is all that is being protected. Does not the Chief Secretary understand that the more that the Government narrow down the areas of tax policy to which they attach importance, the greater the suspicion that everything else is negotiable?

Mr. Cash: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Maude: No; I have given way several times and this is a short debate.

Why cannot the Chief Secretary say, as he has apparently been ready to say about the budget rebate, that such matters are simply not negotiable? Does he not understand that the rebate on which he stands so proudly was negotiated only because the Prime Minister of the day was ready to fight for it?

Today, I hope that the Chief Secretary will give some straight answers to the questions that he failed to answer last week. Will he use the veto to protect Britain's rates of stamp duty on house purchases? Will he use the veto to protect Britain's VAT rates? Will he use the veto to protect jobs in the City of London from the imposition of the withholding tax? Will he say no to the equally damaging fudge on exchange of information, which further analysis makes increasingly clear would pile up extra transaction costs and drive business out of the UK?

What assurance can the Chief Secretary give that our veto on tax will remain? Does he agree with the German Finance Minister, who clearly thinks that it should go? He said:

"It is my personal view that we eventually must go to qualified majority voting on the sensitive issue of taxes".

That was not just a personal view after all, because the German Chancellor agrees. He said:

"I must stress that the finance minister has the backing of the Government when he demands steps in this direction."

The Finnish Government, who will take over the EU presidency in July, have put moving to QMV on tax matters high on the agenda. They say:

"Majority voting on taxation is not a question of if but of when".

Until the whistle was blown on them, the Government were merrily proceeding down the path of ever greater tax harmonisation. Why should they have committed themselves to protecting only such a narrow range of taxes from majority voting if they were not really saying, with a nudge and a wink, that everything else was negotiable? Why did the Prime Minister refer just to personal taxes when he spoke in the French National Assembly—as if that was not sending the clearest signal possible that the rest was open to negotiation?

That there is such a programme of tax harmonisation in the EU is now beyond question. That the Government have given the impression that they will go along with much of it is utterly clear. When Commissioner Monti and Mr. Strauss-Kahn claimed that Britain is "on board" for the EU's tax proposals, and when Mr. Strauss-Kahn said that he was confident that Britain would be signed up to tax harmonisation by the middle of next year, were they running scare stories? Were such claims the tools that *The Sun* used to generate scare stories in this country? That is absurd. In fact, Commissioner Monti and Mr. Strauss-Kahn have let the cat out of the bag.

I wonder whether Ministers understand—

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maude: No, I shall not give way.

I wonder whether Ministers understand how offensive it is to people, and how demeaning it is, that the Government have had to beg our European partners to moderate their language—"Not in front of the children, because it will upset them"—as though the German Ministers' honesty and openness in this matter threatened to upset the concerted deception that the Government have maintained.

As so often, the Government have been trying to be all things to all men, but it is decision time. Let us for once have clear answers to simple questions. I commend the motion to the House.

7.50 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Byers): I beg to move, To leave out from "House" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

recalls that the last Government's record on tax was one of broken promises, that it raised taxes 22 times having promised to cut taxes, including putting VAT on domestic fuel and power having specifically promised not to do so, and further that it tried to raise VAT on fuel to 17.5 per cent.; welcomes the fact that this Government has kept all of its promises on taxation, including its promises not to raise the basic or top rates of income tax and cutting VAT on fuel to 5 per cent.; and further welcomes the Government's approach to taxation at an international level, favouring fair tax competition, supporting concerted action at European level, including through the EU Code of Conduct Group, to deal with discriminatory and unfair tax practices that distort real competition, stating that it will not support measures that are not in Britain's national economic interest or that damage British business, harm investment and jobs, or damage Europe's competitiveness, and reiterating that it will retain the veto on tax issues and that decisions on tax will remain subject to unanimity.

At the start of this debate, in which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer was to have led for the Government, I associate myself with the remarks made by the shadow Chancellor; I am sure that the whole House wishes to express its condolences to my right hon. Friend and the rest of his family.

In tonight's debate, I shall set out the Government's position on taxation, not just in relation to Europe but on domestic taxation. I shall specifically address the issues of tax harmonisation and of unfair tax practices, including tax abuse and evasion. I know that the issue of tax evasion and tax havens excites Conservative Members; they have been raising it indirectly, in one way or another for a long time. I can understand their personal interest, because of course—

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): What about the Paymaster General? Where is he?

Mr. Byers: There we have a good example. It is of personal interest to members of the Conservative party, because the present Treasurer of the Conservative party, Michael Ashcroft, has for many years been a tax exile, preferring to pay his taxes in Belize rather than Bristol.

The real issue that the Conservative party needs to address is why the party's latest accounts show a cash donation of £1 million by a connected party of Michael Ashcroft. No identity is disclosed. Why the secrecy? The only logical conclusion is that the donor, whether a company or an individual, is registered in a tax haven, and does not pay a penny in taxes in the United Kingdom. In my view, our democratic process must not be for sale to the highest bidder. I hope that the Tory party will come clean on that donation. We challenge the Leader of the Opposition to disclose the detail.

I want to place on the record tonight our position in relation to domestic taxation and on the issues in relation to Europe that were raised by the shadow Chancellor in his opening speech.

In place of the old spending philosophy, which sought to justify a policy of irresponsible tax and spend, this Government take a different, and principled, approach to public spending. Today—unlike 20 years ago—no national Government can set tax, spending and borrowing policies in isolation. They do so in a competitive global economy, within which we must justify policies for expenditure and taxation not just to our electorate but to a wider audience.

Mrs. Browning: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: May I make some progress? Then I shall give way to the hon. Lady.

Today, an irresponsible approach to tax, spending and borrowing—which is, in any case, the wrong approach—will be swiftly punished by financial markets. By contrast, a Government who take a prudent and sensible approach will enjoy the benefits in lower long-term interest rates and higher investment, which flow from the benefits of credibility.

The Government believe that efficiency and value for money in public spending are of central importance. Every penny spent must be justified by its objectives, priorities and efficiency. The Government have a responsibility to the public to use public money as efficiently as possible; and when, shortly, we publish the new public service agreements, we shall show exactly what the public can expect to get from the additional money that is being put into those services.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) first.

Mrs. Browning: The right hon. Gentleman has moved on, but before he moves too far from his point about Michael Ashcroft, may I ask him whether he and his colleagues understand a fundamental point about the difference between someone like Michael Ashcroft and the present Paymaster General when it comes to overseas funds? Michael Ashcroft is a private citizen. The Paymaster General, who also has offshore trusts, currently presides over a policy that deprives some of my constituents—some of the poorest pensioners in the land—of £75 a year. That is the difference.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Minister responds, I think it would be a good idea if we returned to the subject of tax harmonisation.

Mr. Byers: I shall certainly do so, Mr. Deputy Speaker, but first I shall point out to the hon. Lady that it was the Leader of the Opposition who said that there would be no secrecy as regards Conservative party accounts. I want to move on to the issues that I know are energising Conservative Members, because they want to get away from the fact that a secret £1 million donation in their accounts has been revealed; and I want to rush to address the issues that were raised by the shadow Chancellor.

The reality—

Mr. Blunt *rose*—

Mr. Byers: I shall give way to the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) if he wants to intervene now.

Mr. Blunt: The right hon. Gentleman introduced his remarks with talk about the fiscal rectitude that the Government were going to adopt on public expenditure. The Economic Secretary has been unable to give me an answer as to how long the economic cycle is. As that is rather germane to balancing the books over the economic cycle, how long is the economic cycle?

Mr. Byers: I thought that there was going to be a question about tax harmonisation so that we could satisfy the shadow Chancellor and his Front-Bench colleagues.

I want to address the issue of taxation. Let me start by saying clearly what our manifesto pledge was. We said that the principle of a tax system must be to encourage work. We said clearly in our manifesto that the whole purpose of a tax system must be to encourage work and reward effort. We stated:

"we are pledged not to raise the basic or top rates of income tax throughout the next Parliament."

We have kept that promise, and will continue to do so throughout this Parliament. We have not raised, and we shall not raise, the top or basic rates of income tax throughout this Parliament.

[Mr. Byers]

We also said in our manifesto that we would reduce

"the high marginal rates at the bottom end of the earning scale".

We have kept that promise, too. As a result of the introduction of the working families tax credit—now opposed by the Opposition—national insurance reform and Britain's first-ever national minimum wage, the Government can give two very specific guarantees, on which we shall deliver. For families and their children, in a family where someone works full time, there is now a guaranteed income of at least £190 a week. To the same working family, we give a second guarantee: that no income tax will be paid on earnings below £220 a week. *[Interruption.]*

For the benefit of the shadow Chancellor, I am moving the amendment standing in the Prime Minister's name, and I am speaking to the amendment, which is in order because it has been accepted by the House authorities. I am making my own speech. The hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) may not like it, but I am placing on record the appalling tax record of the previous Conservative Government. I want to remind Opposition Members of their record, and of the contrast that is now exposed—

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Byers: In a second.

This Government, by contrast with the previous Government, can be trusted by the British people on tax. If we make manifesto commitments on tax, those commitments will be met. That contrasts starkly with the Conservative Government's approach. That is why we shall meet the pledge in our manifesto:

"We renew our pledge not to extend VAT to food, children's clothes, books and newspapers and public transport fares",

and why we shall deliver on that promise.

We made a further commitment on VAT at the last election:

"We will cut VAT on fuel to five per cent, the lowest level allowed."

In the very first Budget after the election, we moved immediately to do precisely that. That is why we shall take no lectures from the Conservative party on tax.

In the 1992 general election, the Tories promised time and again that they would cut taxes. After that election, they broke that promise 22 times. That is why the British people will never trust the Tories on tax again. There can be—

Mr. Paterson: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Byers: I shall give way in a moment.

There can be no clearer demonstration than the Tories' approach to value added tax of the fact that they break their promises. In 1979, the Conservatives promised not to increase VAT. In the Budget following that promise, they doubled it. In 1991, the British people were made to suffer the consequences of the Tories' failure on the poll tax in an increase in VAT rates.

Mr. Paterson: We heard all this during the general election. Will the Minister address himself to the actions that he and the Government have taken since they came to power on one area of tax which it rests entirely in the Government's hands to decide—fuel duties and vehicle excise duty? In that area, we now have taxes so high that it costs £252 more to fill up a truck in Britain than in France, and VED is six times as high here as it is in France. What is that doing to jobs and prosperity in a strategic industry such as road haulage?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman's intervention came very close to an argument in favour of harmonisation of taxes with Europe. That is an interesting approach.

I can understand why Conservative Members feel uncomfortable about having their manifesto pledges broken time and time again. I understand that it is not pleasant for them to have those matters drawn to their attention. However, we continue to remind them because it is the truth and it is why the British people do not trust the Tories on taxes.

It is interesting to look through the record, including the record of the time when the shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer was a Treasury Minister. Many steps were taken then which led to the harmonisation of taxes. Which party justified a European directive stating

"we are committed to the harmonisation of indirect taxes"?

It was, of course, the Conservative party when in government. It was a former Chancellor of the Exchequer who said that in 1992. Which party signed at least 18 taxation directives while it was in government? Once again, it was the Conservative party.

That is the same Conservative party that now criticises and makes dire warnings about VAT being imposed from Europe and the same Conservative party that did not match our pledge on VAT. The Conservative party's manifesto did not even mention VAT. Let us not forget that the Conservative Government signed up to a minimum rate of VAT across Europe.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Byers: I want to make some progress.

It was the Conservative party that signed up to extending qualified majority voting into 42 new areas while it was in government. That was done in the Single European Act 1985 and during the Maastricht treaty.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Byers: No. I should make some progress.

The Conservatives are the party that signed the Maastricht treaty, and the person who signed it was the present shadow Chancellor. That is the reality. The Conservatives attack what they once supported and deplore what they once agreed. They disown what they were once proud of and complain about promises when the fact is that we have kept ours and they have broken theirs.

Mr. Cash: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Byers: As the shadow Chancellor would not give way to the hon. Gentleman, I am prepared to do so.

Mr. Cash: Does the Minister agree that, under the Maastricht treaty—under, I think, articles 103, 130 and

various others—it is clear that it is intended to co-ordinate economic policy? How can the right hon. Gentleman deny—it is the burden of his argument, as far as I understand it—that the proposals for tax harmonisation do not flow from the Maastricht treaty? What will he do about it?

Mr. Byers: I must begin by thanking the hon. Gentleman for all the support that he gave us during the general election campaign, which was gratefully received. I am coming on, in literally 30 seconds, to address the issues relating to Europe in which I know the hon. Gentleman so likes to engage.

I move on to taxation in Europe. The arguments on issues concerning Europe should be based on common sense and not on narrow partisan politics. I want to take up some of the issues that have been raised concerning tax harmonisation. There has been a good deal of scaremongering, which we have heard this evening and over the past few weeks. I want to set out the principles that underpin the Government's approach. Our way forward for Europe is the promotion of employment, economic reforms and competitive markets, not tax harmonisation. The Government have made it clear that we shall not support any action at European level that will threaten jobs or the competitive position of British business. So any tax proposals will need to pass that fundamental test.

Mr. Tyrie *rose—*

Mr. Byers: No. I want to make some progress.

Questions of tax require a unanimous decision, so there is no question of tax changes that we do not support being imposed on us from Brussels. We are in favour of tax competition. We are in favour also of national Governments retaining control of taxation. Let us be clear: for the United Kingdom, that means taxation being decided when a British Chancellor of the Exchequer presents a Budget to this House.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham) *rose—*

Mr. Byers: No. I want to make some progress.

We are also in favour of concerted action at European level to deal with unfair tax practices that distort real competition, to close tax loopholes and to cease unfair state aids and unfair tax breaks. The test always has to be whether in a particular instance the proposal delivers economic or financial benefits for the United Kingdom. If it does not, we shall oppose it and argue our case. The United Kingdom will not sign up to anything that is not in the national interest, that raises business costs, that harms investment and jobs or damages the competitive position of Europe.

I must give way to the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) because I did not do so last time.

Mr. Bercow: If the right hon. Gentleman is in favour of tax competition, will he explain to the House why the Financial Secretary is prepared to relinquish up to 10 tax reliefs which work to the competitive advantage of the United Kingdom?

Mr. Byers: We certainly will not be doing that. I shall talk shortly about the group on the code of conduct. There has been much play about the 10 directives that will affect people in Britain. These are the 10 issues that are being discussed within the group. To give right hon. and hon. Members a taste of what is to come, of the 10 directives, five refer specifically to Gibraltar. They come to us as a member state of the European Union. I shall deal with the relevant five directives in the relevant part of my speech.

We shall retain the veto on tax issues. If necessary, we shall be prepared to use our veto to protect the national interest. The Government are clear that decisions on tax will remain subject to the agreement of all member states.

The shadow Chancellor referred to the position of the Finnish presidency and said that it would want to raise the question of all-state agreement. I should draw to the right hon. Gentleman's attention the statement made on 4 December by the Finnish tax Minister, who said that Finland's position

"is that unanimous decisions will make sure a small country can get its voice heard. Our position has not changed on that."

I think that we can see that Finland will not use its presidency to argue that what is at present a requirement for all member states to agree will be changed. So we shall retain the veto on tax issues. If necessary, we shall be prepared to use that veto in the national interest.

The Government's approach to Europe is clear. It is far better to be there shaping and engaging in the debates than sitting powerless on the sidelines. If and when draft Commission proposals come forward, the Government will discuss them constructively. However, we shall always judge them by what is in Britain's national economic interest.

In our discussions on tax in Europe, it is important to remember that we are not alone in our approach. Not only Britain but many other member states oppose the harmonisation of tax rates. Last Wednesday the Italian Finance Minister told the *Financial Times* that harmonisation of corporation tax would be

"untimely, questionable and, above all, hardly feasible"

and that it would be

"wrong in any event."

On the same day the Prime Minister of Spain spoke out against what he called the "dumbing down" of tax harmonisation and opposed a single rate of direct tax because it would be a recipe for inefficiency. There is no majority for the harmonisation of tax rates in Europe, never mind the unanimous agreement that would be required for action. Nor will the need for all-member agreement change. That would require all states of the EU to agree on a change to qualified majority voting on tax, and most member states will not agree to that.

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): The Chief Secretary has laid considerable stress on his claim that the Government support tax competition as a principle. Why did the Chancellor sign the document produced by the group of European socialist parties, titled "The New European Way", one of the principal purposes of which was to prepare the way for greater tax harmonisation? Why did the Chancellor sign a document that commits the Government to a policy that the Chief Secretary now says they oppose?

Mr. Byers: I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman is relying on the Conservative research

[Mr. Byers]

department brief, which has kindly been supplied to me. We seem to have a reciprocal agreement to exchange briefing notes between the official Opposition and the Government. If we co-ordinated it, perhaps we could save costs. Perhaps I should not say such things. I was pleased to take the right hon. Gentleman's intervention to get some balance in interventions from Conservative Members. We heard from an anti-European and have now heard from a pro-European—at least, I understand that that is the right hon. Gentleman's current position. The document that the Chancellor signed addressed issues not of tax harmonisation but of tax competition and if the right hon. Gentleman reads the document in detail, he will see that.

Mr. Dorrell: I was relying not on the Conservative research department but on the document provided in full on the internet. The Chief Secretary claims that it does not address tax harmonisation, but it addresses tax policy co-ordination—it is all in a word. A passage in the document specifically commits the signatories to greater tax policy co-ordination, but the Chief Secretary said that that is not Government policy. Did the Chancellor sign up in a fit of absent-mindedness? What is the Government's policy?

Mr. Byers: The policy is clear: we will judge every issue on its merits. We will exercise our veto over those that are not in the national interest, but we will not take the dogmatic approach of vetoing everything, as the Conservative Government did.

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mr. Tyrie *rose—*

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford) *rose—*

Mr. Byers: I must make some progress, because I have probably taken longer than most hon. Members would wish me to so far.

Britain is not alone among member states in insisting that direct taxation is a matter for the national state. There is no proposal—nor any prospect of one—for the harmonisation of income tax in the European Union. No member state believes that there is a case for a European rate of corporation tax. Even the President of the Commission has said that

"income tax and corporation tax are sovereign national matters and will remain so."

The right hon. Member for Horsham, and the motion before us, raise the issue of the code of conduct group. I shall take this opportunity to inform the House of some facts, so that we do not allow prejudice to get in the way. The formation of such a group was first discussed during the United Kingdom presidency in November 1992. The group does not deal with tax harmonisation. It considers those measures that may be discriminatory and create harmful tax practices.

Five measures in the United Kingdom tax system are on the list to be considered by the code of conduct group. Five other measures relate specifically to Gibraltar. The fact that a measure is discussed by the group does not necessarily mean that it thinks that they are harmful, or that any pressure will be put on the United Kingdom to change them. The United Kingdom will submit a robust defence of the five measures that the group will discuss, and we are confident that they do not constitute harmful tax practices. We are able to submit a robust defence because of the criteria to be applied.

A potentially harmful measure is one where the effective level of taxation is lower than the general level of taxation in the member states in question. For a measure to be harmful, it also has significantly to affect the location of business activity in the Community. For example, it can be argued that a measure confined to small businesses is not harmful.

Measures are to be scrutinised against the following five further criteria; whether the measure is directed only at non-resident companies; whether it is ring-fenced from the domestic market; whether there is no real economic activity associated with it; whether the rules for the determination of profits are consistent with those of the OECD; and whether the measure is transparent.

As for the more general work of the code of conduct group, we have made it clear that we support fair tax competition and will not agree to any measures that will harm United Kingdom businesses and jobs. However, we believe that it is right to take action to tackle harmful tax practices, and that is what we intend to do.

As I said earlier, the Government believe that our approach to Europe should be based on common sense, putting reason before dogma. The test has to be whether proposals deliver economic or financial benefits to the United Kingdom. That is the Labour Government's principled position on Europe, which puts the national interest first, and it is worth contrasting that with the Conservative party's position. It has ruled out membership of monetary union for 10 years. Even if it were to be in Britain's national economic interest to join before then, it would not matter because joining has been ruled out for at least 10 years.

I remind the House of the comments made by the right hon. Member for Horsham when he was interviewed by *The Observer*. He was asked whether what he was saying was that, even if the single currency were a success, he could not use that to decide whether or not to join. The right hon. Gentleman replied, "Absolutely." That is another example of personal political positioning.

The events of the past few weeks have revealed the modern Tory party as anti-Europe, backward looking and with no vision of the future that lies ahead for our country. A serious debate is under way in Europe about its direction. This Government's modernisation and reform agenda applies not only to the United Kingdom but to Europe. The Tories failed in Europe because they stood on the sidelines and resorted to foghorn diplomacy. We will engage our European partners, shape the debate and ensure throughout that we act in our national interest. The reforms necessary in Europe are not in conflict with our national interest and, indeed, the two often complement each other. That is the way forward, that will be our course of action, and I commend the amendment to the House.

8.18 pm

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): I extend the condolences of my hon. Friends and myself to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the loss of his father, who

was a constituent of mine. I am sure that the Chancellor is in the village of Insch with his mother and brothers, and our thoughts are with them. Mr. Brown senior was a well-known, well-liked and well-respected figure in the community and he will be missed.

When I read the Conservative motion, I thought that it was sensible, but I am concerned by the way in which the argument has stacked up, which reveals two things. First, the Conservatives in government understood the practicalities of trying to secure co-operation on tax matters by voluntary agreement, but in opposition they have sought to turn that constructive approach into an anti-European rant. They are deliberately and mischievously failing to distinguish between voluntary co-operation for tax co-ordination—good—and the imposition of harmonised tax rates against our will—bad. Those are two quite different propositions. Yet Conservatives deliberately blur and mix them, so that people are not quite sure what is being addressed. Ultimately, it is not possible to support the motion because of the spirit behind it.

Liberal Democrats strongly believe that taxation is, and should remain, a national matter, and that we should be prepared to use our veto in the national interest. At the same time, if we can co-ordinate tax matters better with our European partners by agreement, that is all to the good. In doing so, we may be able to advance our national interest.

Why should we co-operate? On environmental issues, environmental taxes may well be more effective if they are agreed on a European basis. If we can plug tax loopholes—many of which are cynically exploited by financial institutions and accountants, many of whom are in the Conservative party—and argue for fairer duty levels on things such as our home-produced whisky, which suffers discrimination in some areas, that would be to our advantage, too. It is silly of the Tories to imply that such issues are neither to be looked at nor discussed.

Mr. Plaskitt: The hon. Gentleman raises the important matter of environmental taxes. As Liberal Democrats are in favour of £29 billion worth of new environmental taxes, will he take this opportunity to spell out to the British public what they are?

Mr. Bruce: I am not prepared to answer that question. If Labour Members intend to intervene with lists of questions, they had better get the brief right. This matter pops up in every debate. We shall continue to send hon. Members copies of our document. If they read it, they will stop asking silly questions.

We have some concerns about the issue that is currently being debated throughout Europe. We are in favour of co-operation but we oppose harmonisation. The Government must make the distinction clear. We should be seeking to build a liberal Europe. That is a good word. Such a Europe would not have unnecessary centralisation on these issues.

We certainly do not want a socialist Europe full of conformity, control and centralisation. Therefore, tax competition is the right discipline because it will limit tax variation of its own accord. It will ensure that European tax levels, although variable throughout the EU, will take full account, and will have to take full account, of competitive pressures in the wider world—a point which, to be fair, was clearly acknowledged by the Chief Secretary.

I am confused by the Government's position on duty-free goods. A leading article in the *Financial Times* today argued that there was a smack of cynicism and opportunism in the Government's about-face on the issue. Duty-free goods must ultimately go. They cannot be justified on economic grounds. They undermine many small businesses in Britain and erode our tax base, as many will testify.

The real question is whether it is wise of the Government to express what I would suggest is synthetic opposition to getting rid of duty-free goods when the issue has already been dealt with and when there is unlikely to be a fundamental change of conclusion. The Government's position is unclear and inconsistent.

The third issue raised by the Opposition motion is what constitutes harmful tax competition. If we are talking about back-door subsidies of one kind or another, there can be a genuine debate about whether such subsidies should be eliminated by agreement, or whether each nation should be left to decide whether a subsidy is of benefit. That certainly should not be imposed on us. There are not more subsidies because, in a single competitive market, each nation ultimately has to determine that, in the long term, they are not in their economic interests.

There are those in the Irish Republic who are not entirely convinced that low corporation taxes have brought all the benefits that, on the face of it, appear to have been attracted. Businesses have located in Ireland to take advantage of the low tax rates, but they have repatriated the money. Ireland's GDP has been inflated to a level whereby it does not qualify for the cohesion funds which have been so important to the Irish economy. Most Irish citizens are not aware of the trickle-down effect of this wealth because it is not trickling down to the citizens. The Irish may want to reflect on whether that policy is in their long-term interests. We should allow market discipline and co-operation to be the way in which such anomalies are addressed, not central diktat.

We must be careful how we proceed because there may be measures which, for example, could help to promote employment in areas of high unemployment. They may be targeted and time limited to be of benefit, and it would be foolish to put ourselves in a situation where we never can agree measures to deal with special problems in special circumstances. Therefore, I urge the Financial Secretary not to give up tax breaks unless there is a clear case for doing so. I hope that when she replies she will make it clear that that would be her position.

In addition, when the Financial Secretary replies, some of us would like to know exactly where we are with tax relief on dividends for non-tax paying pensioners. That matter was on the Paymaster General's desk. He gave an undertaking to the House that it would be dealt with, but we now understand that it is on the Financial Secretary's desk. We would like to know whether she will deal with it and when she will make an announcement, preferably before the measure comes into effect.

My fourth point relates to the single currency. Today, the Prime Minister claimed to be engaging with Europe in order to promote our interests. That has been echoed by the Chief Secretary. The truth is that the decision to stay out of the single currency could make it more difficult in future for us to shape the European agenda and to serve our and other members' interests on tax policy

[Mr. Bruce]

and budgetary issues. That could be a real problem to which the Government to date seem not to have an answer.

The Chief Secretary made a powerful statement to the effect that we will engage in Europe, argue our case and present a robust argument in favour of the British national interest. Unfortunately, there will be no British representative in the decision-making body of the European central bank. There will be no British representative in the Euro X committee of financial Ministers for the co-ordination of economic policy. Empty chairs cannot negotiate, and that is a danger which the Government have not addressed.

My final point relates to the specific working of the single currency in the context of this debate. It is our absolute belief that a single currency will work effectively only if there is sufficient fiscal flexibility and subsidiarity. The argument being put forward by, for example, Oskar Lafontaine, that a single currency requires the co-ordination of taxation, is 180 degrees wrong. A single currency requires member states to be able to adjust their tax policy to take account of differentials within those member states. With a common exchange and a common interest rate, that flexibility must be maintained.

My challenge to the Government is to be clear about that and to enable us to give a lead. As the Chief Secretary said, there is no unanimity on this—indeed, there is barely a majority—and countries such as Spain, Sweden, Denmark and Italy are anxious to have Britain inside the euro single currency arguing that case robustly and ensuring, at the end of the day, that, although Germany may be the biggest member of the EU, it cannot impose tax uniformity, however much its Finance Minister wishes to do so, against the wishes of the majority or against the wishes of any one member determined to argue the case.

Mr. St. Aubyn: The hon. Gentleman agrees that fiscal policy will be needed to offset inappropriate monetary policy within a single currency. Will he confirm that, in Britain, current research shows that a change in fiscal policy will be required of the order of a 5p increase in taxation, or up to £10 billion taken out in taxation from the economy?

Mr. Bruce: That is arrant nonsense. The whole point about fiscal flexibility is that we can make our own decisions. We need to pursue an economic policy to ensure co-ordination and convergence, something that my party has consistently argued, but it is absolute nonsense to say that anybody can require us to alter our tax regime against our wishes and regardless of our own interest.

The Germans in particular are concerned that we have a flexible economy and a low-tax base, and that that affects our competitiveness to their disadvantage. They have problems, but the message to Mr. Lafontaine is, "Don't expect Europe to solve Germany's problems." Let Germany solve its own problems and recognise that tax policy should remain completely a matter for national interests and national Governments.

Once that is established, it may be possible to co-ordinate the policies that are necessary to enable this country to join the single currency early rather than late, and not to be in the absurd position of the Conservative party, which will not join even if it is in the national interest to do so. Indeed, the Conservative party has put itself increasingly in a situation in which even our continued membership of the European Union would be in question if we had no intention of joining at any time in the foreseeable future.

We must be upfront as a United Kingdom clearly pursuing a liberal agenda for Europe and rejecting the notion of a socialist Europe with controls, centralisation and diktat. I suspect that the Chancellor has reason to regret the fact that the document that flew around the socialist circles of Europe was initiated in his office. It is not surprising that he has tried to distance himself from it. I say to him and his team, "Don't apologise. Distance yourselves from it, strike the right balance and recognise that Britain can win this intellectual argument—if only the Government engage in it robustly enough."

8.32 pm

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): I welcome the opportunity to contribute to the debate, because in the past two or three weeks we have lived through one of the most hysterical periods in respect of tax harmonisation that this country has experienced for an awfully long time. To get an impression of how far we are from the reality of the European debate, it is instructive to look at newspapers from France and Germany. They have been focusing not on tax harmonisation, but on splits and debates in the Franco-German alliance in a way wholly unrelated to the discussion in this country.

There has been the kind of relentless press campaign that this country has not seen for a long time, with complete and utter fabrications about tax harmonisation. One day last week, *The Sun* even led its front page with the bold statement that zero-rating of value added tax on children's clothes and on food would go if Britain joined the single currency. There is no such proposal. We have to ask those newspapers, and Conservative politicians who support that disingenuous campaign, why they are doing that and why they are so intent on using extreme exaggeration that is not justified in any basis of fact to put their arguments.

We need to be clear about why the Conservative party has initiated tonight's debate. In trying to get the discussion about tax harmonisation and tax issues going, it hopes that the electorate will forget its record on taxation in government. The charges for its period in office are clear. First, the burden of taxation was shifted in an unfair direction. The only people who were paying less tax at the end of 18 years of Conservative government than they were in 1979 were those earning more than £70,000 a year, and only because everyone else was paying more.

Secondly, the Conservatives in government did something in respect of VAT that they said categorically in opposition that they would not do. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that on many tax issues, and especially on the issue of tax harmonisation, they attempt to muddy the waters and pretend, "Yes, we were dishonest and misled you, but isn't that what all politicians are like and isn't that what is likely to come through the back door via Europe?"

Let us deal with the substance of the allegations about tax harmonisation and look at the facts. Nothing in the Maastricht treaty or the essence of the single currency

means that we have to have tax rates set in Brussels or harmonised taxation rates. The key reference in the Maastricht treaty is to sensible budget deficits—no more than 3 per cent. of gross domestic product. That leaves any democratically elected Government the option of a deficit that is either high tax, high spend and sensible or low tax and low spend. To pretend otherwise is simply not justifiable.

In general, when the European Union talks of tax harmonisation—there is a problem of language and translation—it is not talking about harmonising tax rates. It is talking about eliminating special tax breaks, which distort the market, and it is right to do so. In Britain, we should have no problem with that. Britain has a lot to gain from the elimination of tax breaks that provide unfair advantage to the industries of other countries, and of distortions in the single market.

On many occasions, we have heard Euro-sceptic Conservative Members rightly criticise what they perceive to be unfair state subsidies in other EU countries. A mechanism to tackle that should be supported.

Mr. Bercow: Given that the word "co-ordinate" is defined as

"to place or class in the same order, rank, or division",

at page 898 of the "Oxford English Dictionary", how is it to be distinguished in meaning from the word "harmonise"?

Mr. Rammell: I have not referred to page 898 as closely as has the hon. Gentleman. I would ask him to give the House a justification that takes his case forward and makes clear how any of the proposals on the table will take away the right of the British Government to set our tax rates. Nothing in the debate enables him to make that case.

I go further on the European situation: there are no European Union provisions for harmonisation of income tax rates, and no one has suggested that we should have that. There is no EU proposal to harmonise corporation tax rates. The hon. Gentleman and his hon. Friends will refer to Oskar Lafontaine. The most interesting revelation of the past few days is that his views do not even appear to be those of the German Government, let alone views that will win support across the EU.

The press has commented particularly on talk about the co-ordination and harmonisation of VAT rates. There have been co-ordinated VAT rates in this country and in Europe since 1977—more than 21 years. The idea that this is some new-fangled European wheeze to take away the powers for us to set our VAT rates simply does not bear any form of scrutiny.

The biggest single measure of tax harmonisation throughout Europe was introduced in 1991, as a result of the Conservative Government's decision to agree to a standard rate of VAT of 15 per cent. It was also agreed that, once introduced, that rate could not be reduced to less than 5 per cent. When the Labour Government came to power and wanted to reduce VAT on fuel, they could reduce it only to 5 per cent. and not to zero because of that tax-harmonising decision made by the Conservative Government. The Conservative party in government had already sold the pass.

There has been much misinformation about the withholding tax, the aim of which is to prevent tax evasion. The Government are rightly supporting that. The withholding tax concerns only cross-border income from investments in one member state to those resident in another. It has no impact on domestic savings taxation, but one would not have known that from the comments of Conservative Members and the newspapers in the past few weeks.

It has been argued that, if we sign up to a single currency, we will automatically have to sign up to harmonised tax rates. That is not the position in the United States of America. It has a single currency, but the individual states have differing tax rates. That deals with that argument.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Is the hon. Gentleman saying that he would not use the veto on the withholding tax? If so, what does he believe the impact of the imposition of the tax would be on the bond market in London?

Mr. Rammell: I support the Government's position. There is concern about the euro bond market. If the withholding tax provision takes the form of an exchange of information, we can live with that. If it would damage the euro bond market, it would have to be agreed by unanimity and the veto would be available to us. I shall deal with the arguments about the manner and circumstances in which we use the veto, because that is pertinent to the discussion.

We should bear in mind the fact that the majority of Governments of the European Union, the European Central bank and the European Commission take the view that fair tax competition is a good thing. From the comments of Conservative Members and newspaper articles in the past few weeks, one does not get the impression that the majority view in the European Union is that fair tax competition is a good thing, and that taxes as a percentage of gross domestic product must be cut to make the EU more competitive. That is the stated aim of the ECB, and it is what the European Commission and the majority of elected Governments throughout the European Union are saying. They are hardly the views of a European Union that is about to harmonise our taxes and jack up our tax rates through some back-door mechanism.

It has also been argued—we heard the argument again this evening—that what the Government are saying is all very well, but we must listen to the detail and to what Oskar Lafontaine and this or that politician in Europe are saying. We should treat such comments with caution. Even within one Government and in one nation state there will always be a difference of views. Proposals will be talked up but will go nowhere, and kites will be flown that do not stay up.

The European Union has 15 different elected Governments, a Commission, a Central bank and a Parliament, so different proposals will be made and different views will be expressed. Just because ideas have been floated does not mean that there will be a change of policy. Over the years, the European Council table in Brussels has been littered with tax proposals that have died the death, such as the carbon tax proposals and the proposals for VAT on passenger transport, which were withdrawn in 1996.

It is not grown up or sensible government and politics to pretend that certain discussions will never take place or that no views will ever be expressed with which we are

[Mr. Rammell]

not comfortable. We should have a grown-up and mature debate on those issues, not the hysteria that we have seen in recent weeks every time such a suggestion has been made.

An article in the *Financial Times* this morning hit the nail on the head. It said:

"Tax issues are portrayed in black and white. In reality, governments opposed to one proposal often agree on other matters and there are inconsistencies within member states, notably in Germany."

That is the reality of the situation, and it should be brought out in the debate.

We are trying to refute the propaganda onslaught from the Conservative party about there being a major campaign to harmonise taxes, but people need not listen to Labour Members or to the Government. Conservative Members in particular should note what the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke) said last week. Commenting on tax harmonisation, he said that the United Kingdom

"could well benefit from changes . . . I always vetoed the savings tax which the Germans were very keen on . . . Gordon Brown sounded exactly like I did when I rejected scare stories about tax harmonisation".

The right hon. and learned Gentleman said that *The Daily Telegraph* and the *Daily Mail* had gone over the top on the basis of

"foolish remarks by Oskar Lafontaine."

That is what a senior and respected Conservative politician—a former Chancellor of the Exchequer—is saying. It would be helpful to hear from the Opposition spokesman who will wind up the debate whether the Conservative party considers that the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe was being naive, whether he was making a deliberate attempt to mislead, or whether he was talking decent common sense and trying to bring people back to the facts.

There will always be a debate in Europe—in the European Union—about the way in which we wish to go forward, about the nature of the single currency, about whether we should join and about when we should join; but we should engage in that debate in a constructive, mature, reflective way. That is simply not happening at present. I believe that the country's only chance of economic success in the future lies in its being part of the European Union. We must seize the opportunities that exist, we must engage constructively in debate, and we must work together. There are circumstances in which we can achieve more together than we can alone: we should reject the isolationism—the retreat into the past, and into unreality—proposed by the Opposition.

We will preserve the country's economic interest. We must secure the best for Britain, but that will mean working with our partners in the European Union, rather than constantly rubbishing and rejecting them as Opposition Members do.

8.47 pm

Mr. Stephen Dorrell (Charnwood): The hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) said that a debate was going on in Europe. At the end of his speech, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury also referred to a debate in Europe—a debate about the shape of the Europe in which we want to live in future.

My right hon. and hon. Friends were right to table the motion. The Government must be much clearer—much straighter with the House, and with the British people—about where they stand in that debate about the future shape of the continent. The truth is that they are trying to have it both ways. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has signed up to the "New European Way" document, about which I shall have more to say shortly. While trying to cuddle up to the Party of European Socialists on the continent, the Government are also seeking to retain the endorsement of the *Daily Mail*.

It is not surprising that, when Ministers are speaking on the one hand to Mr. Lafontaine and Mr. Jospin and on the other hand to Mr. Dacre, they find that they have no words to cover the case; but the fudge that the Government are using to deal with the two audiences that they seek to satisfy is wearing thin. It is not a question of Europe, in or out; it is not a question whether we should engage in the argument on the continent about the future shape of Europe.

The Prime Minister was right this afternoon to stress the importance of Britain's engaging in the argument about the future shape of Europe, because our essential national interests are tied up in the conclusion that is reached in that debate. In truth, the debate is much more uncomfortable for the Prime Minister and for new Labour, because it is about Europe left or right, not Europe right or wrong.

One cannot help feeling a sneaking sympathy for the Prime Minister, in a sense. From his point of view, it is rotten luck that he should have spent so many years and so much effort in an attempt to suppress the voice of the old left in his party. He has seen off the old high-spend, high-tax forces in his party, and consigned them, more or less, to silent oblivion; then up pops the Party of European Socialists, reviving all the ideas that he thought that he had quelled in his own party.

It is not surprising that Ministers feel a certain embarrassment. Just at the moment when they thought that they had put all that to bed, suddenly the people on the continent whom they had been proud to regard as their friends—the new European left—start sending back across the channel all the arguments that are so inconvenient within the domestic argument for new Labour and the Labour party.

In an intervention, I quizzed the Chief Secretary on "The New European Way." I did not rely on selected excerpts. I enjoyed reading the document from beginning to end. I emphasise the point. My quarrel is not, by and large, with the European Commission. It is with the Party of European Socialists, and the vision of the future that is set out in the document.

I enjoyed reading "The New European Way" from beginning to end. It was a bit like a trip down memory lane. I quote one or two excerpts to which the Chief Secretary might not have had his attention drawn by the Conservative research department, because it draws some of the colour of the document:

"For the European Socialists and Social Democrats, pursuing macroeconomic policies in the interest of Europe's citizens has several aspects".

It then makes several unexceptional comments, until it comes to this masterpiece of an art that I thought was dead—the art of drawing up a composite motion. It says

that, for the European Socialists—how the Prime Minister must have hated association with that word "socialists"—one of those aspects is

"a commitment to an increase of disposable incomes"—

the next bit was inserted presumably by the Chancellor of the Exchequer or Mr. Ed Balls—

"that is compatible with price stability"—

end of insert—

"so as to stabilise consumer expectations and macroeconomic demand, given an EU-import and export GDP share of only around 8 per cent."

The last bit, I suspect, was composited by the Greeks, but the key burden of that passage is that here is the voice, which has been given crisper and more grammatical form by Mr. Lafontaine, of people on the continent who still believe that it is important to maintain total aggregate demand as the key to delivering stable planning of the economy.

Those are the arguments of 25 years ago, and they are in the document that was signed by the British Chancellor of the Exchequer—small wonder that Ministers find themselves uncomfortable when asked whether he signed the document in a fit of absence of mind.

In particular, the Chancellor and the Prime Minister, who is known to hate that word "socialist", are embarrassed by the fact that they are associated with the document, but some people on the continent have made that case in the Party of European Socialists for a clear reason. Mr. Lafontaine is not embarrassed by the use of the word "socialist", and he is certainly not embarrassed by association with some of those ideas, because behind those commitments is a clear agenda.

Despite what the Chief Secretary says about his commitment to tax competition, the agenda is to reduce tax competition to make it easier to raise taxes and to go back to high-tax, high-spend policies. That is why "The New European Way" is dangerous, and why the Government, if they want to be taken seriously when they say that they are in favour of tax competition and divorced from the old ways of 20 years ago, should not have signed the document, but should, as the hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce), the Liberal Democrat spokesman, said, take the opportunity to distance themselves, as a Government and as a party, from ideas that the Prime Minister would prefer us to believe had been left behind long ago by the British Labour party. That is why I believe that hon. Members and those who follow these affairs outside the House are entitled to know whether the Government are for or against the ideas in the document. Do the Prime Minister and the Chancellor agree with the ideas that are set out by the European Socialists, or do they want us to believe that, although they have signed its document, they prefer the policies of the European centre right?

The Chief Secretary and the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) were right. A debate is going on, and there is a choice to be made between the route of the Party of European Socialists and that of the European centre right. Indeed, that alternative view of the way forward—the ideas of the European centre right—is a much more attractive view for Europe as a whole, and for Britain as part of Europe.

I do not agree with Mr. Lafontaine that a single currency leads inevitably to a single tax-and-spend policy, and I do not understand why the fact that he associates himself with that view should make it attractive elsewhere in this country. Furthermore, not only do I advance that point of view, but I remind the House that the separation between the single currency and tax-and-spend policy is not merely an expression of a point of view; it is set out in the Maastricht treaty, which separates fiscal from monetary policy, and establishes a separate line of responsibility for each.

That is one aspect of the programme of the European centre right which the Prime Minister has to decide whether he favours or is against; tax competition is the second aspect. The Chief Secretary said at the Dispatch Box that he was in favour, and I am delighted to hear it. However, "The New European Way" makes it abundantly plain that the European left is not in favour. Ironically, the argument for tax competition is clearly set out in the document, but it is applied not to Governments but to the private sector.

On competition as a policy for the private sector, the document states:

"With a single currency greater price transparency will increase the scope for cross-border competition. It will make it easier for consumers to compare prices and shop around. Firms will come under pressure to compete on quality, value for money and innovation. Firms will tend to avoid increased competition by price cartels or mergers.

That is why we need policies that offer fair competition in product markets through attacking cartels, monopolies and vested interests."

I completely agree. However, I do not agree with the distinction that the document draws between the argument for competition that the European Socialists think should apply to the private sector and that for protection against competition, which they think should apply to the public sector.

On tax harmonisation in the public sector—it is striking that the authors recognise that economic and monetary union will increase the pressure of competition—the document states:

"Economic and monetary union will intensify the potential for tax competition. Therefore,"—

in other words, because of that increased tax competition—

"further efforts will have to be undertaken to avoid harmful tax competition among the member states."

I wholly disagree with that proposition. The Chief Secretary sought to persuade us that he disagreed, too, but the choice is there. Either the Government follow the document produced by the European Socialists, or they follow the doctrine of the European centre right, which is in favour of tax competition as an essential discipline on Governments for the same reasons that it is an essential discipline on the private sector.

It is not part of my view that sensible technical co-ordination of tax policy has no place. It would be absurd for me to argue that. I was a Treasury Minister, and I followed my right hon. Friend the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), as Financial Secretary. As Ministers, both he and I were responsible for a succession of minor technical alignments of tax policy.

One is on the table from the Commission at the moment—the taxation of interest and royalty payments between associated companies. Ironically, it builds directly on an earlier directive on the taxation of such payments on wholly owned subsidiaries, which was

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passed under the previous Government. That is an example of a dry form of tax policy that offers an opportunity for sensible co-ordination.

I am not against that, but I strongly favour a tilt of policy throughout Europe in favour of tax competition between countries, for exactly the same reasons that I am in favour of private sector companies competing with one another. That sort of competition—by a comparison between the performances of individual Governments throughout Europe—is one of the best guarantees that can be provided that Governments will deliver good-value services.

It is right in principle for tax policy to be the responsibility of directly elected national Parliaments. The responsibility of the member state in Europe for tax policy is not merely an expression of view: it is there in the treaties, and to change it, the Party of European Socialists would need not only to change the balance of power in the Council of Ministers but to deliver a treaty amendment.

When we are faced with the document, bearing the Chancellor's signature, the central question, which only the Prime Minister, the Chancellor and the Government can answer, is: which side are the Government on? Are they on the side of the Party of European Socialists, with Mr. Lafontaine and Mr. Jospin, in favour of a cartel of socialists protecting high taxes; or on the side of the centre right, with a commitment to an open, competitive marketplace as the best discipline on Governments, for the same reason that it is the best discipline on companies?

9.1 pm

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): We are all aware that the Tory party is against further European integration, but it was not until this evening that it became clear to me how far it had moved. The hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash), who was on the extreme Euro-sceptic wing in the previous Parliament, must be bewildered at the speed at which the rest of his party has caught up with him.

Every disagreement, every remark by a Minister from another European country, regardless of whether the Government agree with it, and every rumour that appears in the press, is used to further the Tory agenda. The Tories make no attempt to make a sensible argument against European integration, but merely use crude scare tactics to try to convince the British people that they will suffer catastrophic tax rises if we continue to talk to our European partners. Their whole agenda is obviously nonsense, and I do not believe that the British people will be taken in.

Our debate this evening is not about what is best for the United Kingdom, the British people or British business: it is simply about the dreadful state of the Tory party. That party is utterly demoralised by its disintegration in the House of Lords, and dismayed by the abysmal performance of its leader in the House of Commons, and it does not have the faintest idea how to be an effective Opposition.

I confess myself amazed that the Tory party would dare to raise the subject of tax, in the light of the previous Government's 22 tax rises, the abortive attempt to impose 17.5 per cent. VAT on fuel, and all the broken promises. It appears to think that the people of this country have extremely short memories.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Campbell: No, because I have only a short time, and others want to speak. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will get an opportunity to speak if he catches the Deputy Speaker's eye.

Time and again, the right hon. Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), the previous Prime Minister, told the electorate that tax would be cut, but the reality was that the Tories did the very opposite of what they had promised: they increased taxes. The 22 new Tory taxes cost a typical family more than £2,000 extra. As if that were not enough, just before the 1992 general election, on 17 March, the right hon. Gentleman said:

"we have no need and no plans to extend the scope of VAT."

Earlier that year, he promised that there would be no VAT increase.

That seemed clear. Many people were taken in by the promise from what appeared to be Honest John, but the Tories imposed VAT on fuel at 8 per cent. A massive popular campaign helped the then Labour Opposition to defeat that unfair tax. It would have hit hardest those on low incomes and elderly people, who need to keep their homes warm.

How can anyone ever trust the Conservative party again? The party that keeps its promises is the Labour party, and I am proud to belong to a party which has kept its promises on tax—

Mr. St. Aubyn: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I hope that it is a point of order. Many hon. Members will not be called for this debate.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Mr. Deputy Speaker, are the hon. Lady's comments germane to a debate about tax harmonisation?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I knew that it was not a point of order.

Mrs. Campbell: I know that the Opposition do not like to hear what I am saying, but it is extremely important that we continue to remind the electorate of the promises that were made and not kept.

The new Labour Government have cut VAT on fuel to 5 per cent. They have not raised the basic or top rates of income tax. They have not extended VAT to food, children's clothing, books, newspapers or public transport fares. I know that the Government will continue to keep their promises on tax.

The Conservative party is using scare tactics again when it pretends that the Government will give up their veto on matters of taxation. In 1997, the Labour party manifesto made it clear that we would retain the national

veto over key matters of national interest such as taxation. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has explained clearly that tax proposals require unanimity.

If the rules of the EU were to be changed so that tax proposals were no longer subject to a unanimous vote, that in itself would require a treaty change, and a treaty change cannot be achieved unless everyone agrees. The Government have made it clear that they will not agree, and there is no heart in the great majority of other European countries for change, either. So it simply will not happen. The Conservative Opposition are simply trying to create a crisis out of thin air.

The attitude of the Opposition on European issues shows that their election defeat in 1997 taught them nothing. Their approach of non-co-operation and non-negotiation was supposed to bring an early end to the beef ban. The previous Prime Minister remarked that the ban would be lifted by November. He certainly did not mean this November. He meant November two or even three years ago, when he was still in government.

The Conservative Government's attitude then was that, by bullying and not speaking to our European counterparts, and by refusing to address the arguments, they would win the day. In the event, the Europeans went ahead, and made policy without us. We were always on the outside, until the Labour Government came to power and showed what could be achieved with constructive dialogue and co-operation. That has always been the way to achieve results, and the Government have proved that it works.

The previous shadow Chancellor appeared to believe that entry into the single currency would require centralisation of tax and borrowing powers. He made that point in reply to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, when my right hon. Friend explained the Government's policy to the House on 27 October 1997. The previous shadow Chancellor's view is mistaken, as is that of the present shadow Chancellor. It is easily seen to be a false proposition from the example of the United States, a country that has a single currency but different tax rates in different states. Tax harmonisation is not an inevitable consequence of a single currency.

I am not sure why we are debating this issue tonight. Tax harmonisation is never going to happen in Europe, so there seems little point in spending time and energy debating the issue. The important things to British people are jobs, high living standards and markets that are truly open and in which our businesses can compete.

On Monday morning, I was fortunate to attend one of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's productivity roadshows, that held in the eastern region which was one of several roadshows that my right hon. Friend and his Ministers are holding around the country. I did not see any Opposition Members at the roadshow but the business people who were present warmly welcomed the Government's approach to productivity. They appreciate the reduction in corporation tax to its lowest-ever level, and the tax measures that have been proposed to encourage long-term investment and reward entrepreneurs. The huge increase in the science budget has come as a welcome surprise to research organisations and small firms. They all want the unique blend of low taxation and increased investment that the Government have put in place.

I do not believe that the people will be fooled or scared by Tory stories on tax. The Labour Government are earning people's respect and trust, whereas the Conservative party will never again be trusted on tax.

9.10 pm

Sir Peter Lloyd (Fareham): Before I embark on my speech, I join other hon. Members in expressing my sympathy to the Chancellor on the loss of his father.

Although I am tempted to do so, I shall not follow up the rather individual interpretation of recent history presented by the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell), other than to comment on her reference to the beef ban being lifted by new Labour. In fact, it was finally lifted under the Labour Government because they had continued the measures that were introduced by the previous Conservative Government. The Labour Government deserve some praise for sustaining the effort, but to pretend that the measures belong to them is to rewrite history.

Despite the protests of hon. Members, it is plain that the Government are in a quandary over Europe and tax—it is plain from the exchanges at Prime Minister's questions and from the Chief Secretary's speech this afternoon. I shall not dwell on the quotations, because I intend to speak only briefly, so as to allow others to speak and because the quotations have been bandied about often enough today and on previous occasions.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), I can sympathise with the Government. They want to be at the heart of Europe; they want to engage positively; and they want to appear to the public to be doughty defenders of British interests—defenders who will not let taxes be pushed up by Brussels, and who will retain at Westminster all the power necessary to ensure that they can prevent it.

At the start, it is quite easy for the Government to square all that rhetorically—at least, it would be, if leading European figures refrained from speaking and spoiling the effect—by saying, "We shall co-ordinate our tax systems and co-operate in removing harmful tax competition, but, rely on us, we shall use our veto to protect British interests." However, when it comes to it, the practice will be far more difficult in the continuous horse trading that is how the European Union does business.

The Government will find that, in Europe, not only is it not possible to please everyone, but that it is all too easy to please no one at all. Trying to earn plaudits in Europe and at home will ensure that the Government become distrusted and derided at both ends. That was a lesson that the previous Government learned to their cost, and so will the present Government. I suspect that the Government will pay a high political price, but I fear that the British people will pay a higher economic and constitutional price, unless the Government listen to the Opposition.

It is theoretically possible to have a single currency without tax harmonisation, but I do not believe that that is what will happen in the EU. The very demands of launching the euro and the transparency it brings will put increasing strain on the different tax regimes of member countries. Each country's regime will have at least one feature that the others find objectionable. It is only to be expected that European politicians and officials—not least

[Sir Peter Lloyd]

the German and French Finance Ministers, who are not inconsiderable people—who want an ever-closer union will perceive an overriding need for tax matters to be settled by majority voting.

That will fit in with their ideals, and with the practical problems that they believe must be resolved. The only surprise is that it has been mentioned so soon: they clearly have the bit between their teeth. If the Government apply for United Kingdom entry into the single currency, they may be sure that they will have to accept majority voting on this matter—that is, if they have not already conceded it by then.

There is another reason to expect Europe to move in that direction. It will be the only way that it can conceive of getting rid of harmful tax competition, which features far more in the mind of Europe than in that of the Government. The problem is that one country's benevolent, business-encouraging, job-creating tax arrangement is another country's imported unemployment—or, in other words, another country's harmful tax competition.

I do not believe that the rest of Europe will raise duties on wine and cigarettes to British levels in order to halt the United Kingdom's loss of trade and revenue to northern France. However, we will certainly be expected to begin to raise taxes on business and employment closer to European levels.

We can also be assured that those levels will not come down in the foreseeable future. The new Government in Germany are acting like old Labour, increasing public spending to fund job creation measures. I am not arguing the merits or otherwise of that approach; I am merely emphasising the fact that harmonising taxes will inevitably lead to rising taxes in the United Kingdom.

The most harmful and unjust tax arrangement from the point of view of other European financial centres is that which is vital to the success of the City of London. It is not surprising that they regard the withholding tax as a simple and fair Community arrangement. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) said, the tax will ensure not a more equitable sharing of financial business across the Community but the migration of that business to New York, Zurich and elsewhere beyond Europe's borders. The business will be lost to London and to Europe.

Opposition to tax harmonisation is in Britain's, as well as Europe's, best interests. Europe needs to become more competitive, particularly in light of the fall in the value of Asian currencies. If that is to happen, Europe must have effective internal competition. The single currency is supposed to promote that. However, if the EU is to be genuinely competitive, it will need competing tax regimes. If one EU tax regime is more successful in encouraging business and jobs, it should be copied voluntarily, because it works, rather than legislated out of existence as a threat or an anomaly.

The Chief Secretary recognised that argument in part of his speech. He accepted that international competition and its needs will shape the tax systems of countries across the world, but he failed to draw the appropriate conclusions. The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce)—I hope that I followed him correctly—drew the same conclusion, and rightly challenged the Government to say where they stand on that issue.

The Opposition are concerned not about tax harmonisation that arises naturally and properly because certain tax measures are shown to be more efficient and effective in developing economies, but about enforced tax harmonisation. That should be resisted by the Government, and I hope that, in winding up, the Minister will confirm that that is their intention. Enforced tax harmonisation must be resisted, in the interests of Britain and of the wider Community.

9.19 pm

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Conservative Members have been skating on thin ice this evening, having called a debate about tax harmonisation, on which they face a dodgy dilemma. They are trying to throw accusations at the Government but they get very shaky and worried about Europe because it is the last subject that they want to discuss. Every Tory Member who has spoken this evening has given a slightly different version of how the future of Europe should develop. I hope that the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) will speak because I would like to hear his opinion.

Conservative Members are probably regretting the debate and thinking that it is a waste of an Opposition day. When the press was speculating last Wednesday that the Leader of the Opposition would raise the matter at Prime Minister's Question Time, the Tories made a big gaffe and he raised the issue of the House of Lords. Perhaps there is a greater need for harmonisation of Tory party efforts in the Commons and the Lords than there is for a debate on tax harmonisation.

The debate is a diversionary tactic to raise the spectre of Euro-federalism moving towards us and the evil arm of Europe reaching out to grab money from people's pockets. The Chief Secretary set out clearly Labour's policies and how the Government want tax policy to develop across Europe. We want to focus on reducing public sector borrowing levels and ensuring that there are no reckless spending plans, certainly in Britain. We want to ensure that there is wise, efficient prioritisation in public spending and that we take every opportunity to bear down on unnecessary tax and spending. We want to tax only to fund vital public services. That ethos needs to be spread across all European countries, and I am glad that the Government are leading the way in that.

Fairness in taxation has been mentioned by my hon. Friends. It is important that we focus on how the Government have led the way in Europe in showing that we can have fair taxation. The windfall levy on the privatised utilities is a clear example of redirecting money from areas that were not legitimate to spending that was vital for the nation's interests. The Government have been focusing on the national interest at all times.

Rewarding work and making work pay are fundamental aspects of the Government's tax strategy. I hope that they will lead the way in Europe also on the working families tax credit, which is just one example of the way in which the Government have demonstrated that the best option is to get people off benefit and into work. That is the context of the tax policy that we are discussing.

I was listening to the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude), talking about harmonisation. It is a pity that he is not here now. I am dismayed that Conservative Members had the temerity to call this debate. I did some research. I took a leaf out of

the hon. Member for Stone's book and delved into the Maastricht treaty. Article 99 provides that the Council can, for the first time, legitimately discuss tax harmonisation measures such as turnover taxes, excise duties and other forms of indirect taxation. Whose signature is at the bottom of the page? Why, it is that of the shadow Chancellor. I do not want to talk about facing both ways on this issue because it would probably be unparliamentary, but people must draw their own conclusions. As I said, I hope that the hon. Member for Stone will have an opportunity to speak.

We have been considering how the Tory party wants to scare people about taxation. It is no wonder that people are worried when newspapers build up those issues because the previous Government's record, which has already been set out, was one of making various promises before the election and breaking and discarding them afterwards. We have heard how VAT on fuel was one of the biggest betrayals by the previous Government. The Tory Government gave away our right to a zero rate of VAT on fuel. Conservative Members have the cheek to talk about tax harmonisation when they started the ball rolling. They are the ones who gave away our right to zero rate VAT on fuel. Some apologies are necessary, and a bit of contrition would not go amiss from the Opposition.

I am intrigued to note that there has been a reshuffle on the Conservative Front Bench. There has not been much news about the Tory Front Bench recently—I am not surprised about that—but the hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) used to be the Tory spokesman on tax matters. He has disappeared and has been replaced by a Back Bencher. I was wondering why that was—

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): On a point of information, my hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Mr. Fallon) unfortunately suffered a severe accident in the summer and is incapacitated. We all hope that he will return to the Front Bench very soon.

Mr. Leslie: I am sorry to hear that but glad to hear that the hon. Gentleman will be returning. I mentioned him because I wanted to read out an interesting comment that he made. He said:

"I favour the complete abolition of income tax—a tax on earnings—and its substitution by a purchase tax—a tax on spending."—[*Official Report*, 25 July 1983; Vol. 46, c. 840.]

The Tory party ought to think again before it starts delving into VAT—on fuel or anything else. Indeed, the Library tells me that if we took the hon. Gentleman's advice, VAT would be at 40 per cent.

If we want to consider tax policy across Europe, we should take the opportunity afforded by Opposition days to find out exactly where the Tory party stands. Of course, looking both ways has been a feature of Tory Members' contributions all evening, but how on earth would the Tories square their claim about supposedly wanting to move towards a fairer public finance system with the most ridiculous and contradictory positions that they adopted in debates on the Finance Bill? They were always calling for more public expenditure on defence and to fight crime, yet the amendments that they tabled called for an astronomical reduction of £6 billion in public services.

The Tories' priorities included, for example, the reopening of the loophole of the foreign earnings deduction, which would have cost £300 million. Also as a priority they wanted to halve the rate of bingo duty, something that I look forward to reading in the next Tory manifesto. Another top priority was the abolition of capital gains tax, a commitment costing £1.3 billion. There is a black hole in their financial proposals, and they have no answers as to how they would fill it. Would they cut spending, increase the national debt or raise taxes? We know that their hidden agenda during the election was to put VAT on many items, and I suspect that we could find many more.

If we compare the performance of the Labour Government with that of the rabble who are the Opposition, it is clear that there is no contest, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty) rightly points out. In our manifesto, we promised not only that we would retain the national veto over key matters of national interest such as taxation—this debate is a waste of time because we keep our manifesto promises—but that we would not increase income tax. Despite the Tories' scaremongering before the election, we have kept, and will keep, our promises. That is the difference between the Government and that lot over there.

The Tory party makes policy on the hoof, not knowing where it is going, while the Labour Government stick to the pledges in their manifesto—for example, fair taxation at all times—while always looking to invest in vital public services.

9.29 pm

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): I shall be brief because I know that the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) also wants to speak.

Although there has been much rather tiresome political banter, the day has been useful because both the Prime Minister and the Chief Secretary have reiterated very forcefully and helpfully a complete commitment to the principle of tax competition. Moreover, they have made it clear that tax competition is not an obstacle to closer economic and, indeed, monetary union.

The hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) helpfully mentioned the United States, which is much more highly integrated than Europe is—or, I suspect—will ever be because it is a political union. The United States has a great deal of tax diversity and tax competition. Indeed, it is mandated in the constitution. It is useful to reflect on how it manages the problems that are causing so much trouble for the European left.

There is much self-discipline on taxation. American states realise that there is no point in throwing vast amounts of public money in bribes to companies; it is self-defeating. The states therefore do not compete. There is no dive to the bottom in personal or business taxes in the United States. Moreover, there is a great deal of voluntary co-operation. There is something called a multi-state tax compact, in which American states that have problems co-operating simply negotiate bilateral agreements among themselves, thus dealing with many of the problems that are exercising Europe. That can take place in full monetary union. There is no reason why we in Europe should not follow that precedent.

I shall reiterate the two fundamental reasons why—even for my party, which is more unequivocally committed to the European Union than others—tax should remain a national responsibility. One is the principle of subsidiarity; that it is appropriate that the decision should

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be taken at the lowest-possible level. Indeed, one should repeat the premise, for which Lady Thatcher should claim great credit, of establishing through the single market not merely closer union but the principle of competition among standards—the mutual recognition of different standards as a way of deepening the EU in international trade and investment. It is perfectly possible to have deeper union and competition of product standards, of wages and, indeed, of taxation.

The second basic principle is the acceptance that, if monetary policy is surrendered, national states must have greater freedom to vary taxes and public expenditure. The two things go in opposite directions, and that is how Europe must deal with them. At the same time, there is an argument for co-operation in certain areas. One of those is the problem area of corporation tax. It would be quite wrong for a company operating in several states deliberately to manipulate one Government against another. That would amount effectively to the confiscation of public revenue. That is not tolerated in the United States and should not be in Europe, either.

We should not forget that, although everybody seems to be operating on the assumption that we have a highly competitive corporation tax rate, the UK's rate is higher than in most parts of Europe once all the various allowances are added. The way to deal with corporation tax is to acknowledge the many very damaging and distorting state aids. The previous Government—as well as the present one—accepted that we must intervene to create a single market to co-ordinate policies on corporation tax and state aids.

The right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) made a valuable point, although it was somewhat ideologically put. A genuine problem is arising in Europe as a result of the some of the demands of parts of the European left. I was alarmed to read in the paper this morning that the German socialist party is not only demanding tax harmonisation but opposing something that it calls "wage dumping". It seems to regard as wholly wrong in principle the fact that countries with different wage levels should compete. That is gross economic illiteracy. I hope that the Government—everything that they have said today on this subject is absolutely right—will show the same degree of courage in facing the loony left in Europe as they did toward their own party.

9.34 pm

Mr. William Cash (Stone): In the few minutes available, I shall address the reasons why tax co-ordination follows the Maastricht treaty, as it does in essence. The framework for co-ordination of economic policy is clearly laid down in articles 130, 103, 2, 2a, and so on, and title VII of the treaty lays down the parameters within which it is intended to go, which is why I opposed it so strongly. The statements of Oskar Lafontaine and Gerhard Schröder must be weighed against the remarks of Joschka Fischer, the German Foreign Minister, who has called for the decisive task of our time: the creation of a single state and an international entity in international law.

If one combines those two things, and throws in the costs that are inherent in the things that I shall now list, it becomes clear that not only will it be necessary to co-ordinate a tax policy, but it will be very expensive, and it will cost the British people an arm and a leg. I shall give the House the list.

First, pension liabilities. People will not be able to receive pensions unless the money is found from the other countries in the European Union. In the United Kingdom, we have about £820 billion of privately funded pensions. In Germany, the figure is about £250 billion. As one considers each country in turn, the relevant figure decreases. The money simply is not there. If those countries are to provide public pensions, under the "new way" arrangements, with all the socialism that is now coming in through the back door, they will have to raise massive amounts of tax.

Secondly, cohesion funds. There will be an attempt to create the convergence that does not exist at the moment; that will cost an enormous amount of money.

Thirdly, German and European unemployment is still running at massive levels. That unemployment must be funded.

Fourthly, the Germans want their money back, and if it is given back in the form of a rebate to Germany—which is what Germany is insisting on—inevitably, the burden will fall on other people. Germany is asking for as much as £6 billion.

Fifthly, there is the whole "new European way" and the Keynesian growth policies that go with it—back to the 1960s, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) said.

Sixthly, there are German tax levels. The other day, Joseph Joffe, a columnist for *Süddeutsche Zeitung Magazin*, said in the *Sunday Telegraph* that the reason that the Germans want to Germanise economic and monetary union is to raise the taxes of other countries to German levels, so that capital will not fly out of Germany into Holland and Britain, where taxes are low.

Then there are the issues of enlargement, the black economy and fraud.

When one combines all those factors and throws in the fact that our economic and political philosophy is completely different from that of other socialist policy makers in Europe, one appreciates that the question whether there will be tax harmonisation is not simply an invention—a fantasy. It is based on the Maastricht treaty, which creates co-ordination of economic policy making. Moreover, one has the drive of each of the instances that I have given, towards the necessity to raise the money if the member states are to achieve the policy of the single state that they are aiming at. It is all extremely simple.

There is one last factor—the European Court of Justice. The European Court of Justice is already effectively bypassing the rules that have been laid down, and which were mentioned by the Chief Secretary. According to Professor Franz Vanistendael of Leuven university,

> "Increasingly the European Court of Justice is applying the non-discrimination principle, that has fully been accepted . . . in the area of indirect taxation, to the area of income tax."

The reality is that the Court is running a policy that will lead to harmonisation or co-ordination of taxes—I do not care which word is used. The fact is, it will come in unless it is stopped.

At Prime Minister's questions on Wednesday 2 December 1998, I asked the Prime Minister whether he "can and will" guarantee to veto all this; he did not answer. Nor did he answer when I asked him whether he was going to tell the truth to the British people in a White Paper. He cannot, because he dare not.

9.39 pm

Mr. John Whittingdale (Maldon and East Chelmsford): This has been a short but important debate. It has also been a highly revealing one. The Government have been telling us for months that reports that Europe wanted to harmonise taxes were scaremongering. Only last week the Foreign Secretary talked about

"exploding myths and mischief that have been peddled as facts."

This evening the hon. Member for Harlow (Mr. Rammell) talked about an hysterical period and the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) referred to very crude scare tactics. At the same time, however, other European Governments have made no secret of their wish to move towards a system of common European taxation. They see it as an integral part of economic and monetary union and they cannot understand why that has come as such a surprise.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) is absolutely right. It is theoretically possible to have a single currency without common taxation. However, that is not the intention of the European Union. Three years ago, the president of the Bundesbank said:

"A European currency will lead to member nations transferring their sovereignty over financial and wage policies as well as in monetary affairs. It is an illusion to think that states can hold on to their autonomy over taxation policies."

Since then, there has been a procession of Finance Ministers, central bankers, Commission officials and Heads of Government all reiterating the same message, so that barely a day passes without another European politician spelling it out. Not even the Government can maintain the pretence that this is not happening or that it is not a central priority for many other European states.

We were told, "Never mind, we have a veto. Any change to taxation can be done only on the basis of unanimity, and nobody wants to change that." A few days after that was said, the German Finance Minister announced that it was his view that we should have qualified majority voting on taxation and that the veto should be scrapped. We were told, "That does not matter because it is only a personal view." The Chief Secretary said just that in the debate which took place a week ago. The Prime Minister's official spokesman said that the idea was a non-starter, that it did not represent anyone's official policy and that it had

"a cat's chance in hell"

of being adopted.

Within a matter of hours the French Finance Minister said that he supported Mr. Lafontaine, while the German Chancellor said that it was the official policy of the German Government. The next day, the Finns said that extending majority voting to taxation would be high on the agenda of their presidency.

The Chief Secretary has told us this evening that that is not the view of the Finnish Finance Minister. The Finnish version of Alastair Campbell has said:

"Majority voting on taxation is not a question of if but when."

If the Finnish Government are anything like this Government, we know who is pulling the strings. So much for myths and mischief. What the Government said was irresponsible fantasy a few weeks ago is now, according to the Prime Minister, a debate in which we must be engaged.

The Government use tough language for domestic consumption. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is only too happy to bolster his macho image by talking about using the veto. Tax harmonisation, an end to zero rates of value added tax, a withholding tax and a cut in the British rebate—we are told that decisions on all those things can and will be vetoed. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell) said, the Government are trying to have it both ways because that is not what is being said on the continent. There, they are happy to sign up to greater co-ordination of taxes and an end to so-called harmful tax competition. When the Financial Secretary to the Treasury replies, I hope she will try to square what the Government have been saying with the words in the document to which they signed up, "The New European Way".

Let us be clear, co-ordination of taxes is harmonisation, as Mr. Lafontaine has helpfully made clear. When the other countries in Europe talk about ending harmful tax competition, they are talking about getting rid of Britain's low-tax environment, which has been a magnet for jobs and investment for countries throughout the world.

What about the Liberals? The hon. Member for Gordon (Mr. Bruce) told us that, in his view, taxation is a national matter and that we have a veto which we should be prepared to use. That point was repeated by the hon. Member for Twickenham (Dr. Cable). The Liberal party, too, is happy to talk tough at home, as we heard this evening; however, a few weeks ago, in European Standing Committee B, the hon. Member for Twickenham gave a very different account of Liberal policy. He said that there must be a more satisfactory basis for funding the European Union and that an international income tax was a better option. He said that it would make sense if energy taxes were harmonised from the outset. As for the British rebate, he said that it was politically difficult to perpetuate the idea that Britain is uniquely disadvantaged or that it needs special treatment.

The Government say one thing in the United Kingdom and another on the continent. The Liberals appear to say one thing in the Chamber and another in Committee when they hope that no one is listening.

There is no doubt that there is a European agenda for harmonisation of tax. The Prime Minister has proudly produced today a joint statement that he and the German Chancellor have signed. It says that they are opposed to the harmonisation of personal taxes and to a unified system of corporate taxation, but that does not mean that there will be no harmonisation of corporate taxation. Indeed, the document explicitly leaves the door open for harmonised corporate taxation. That is hardly surprising, as Germany is on record as saying that it is high on its list of political priorities. What about all the other taxes? The statement does not mention VAT, taxes on savings or capital taxation. Clearly, they are now all on the agenda in the Government's eyes.

We know that the withholding tax is under discussion. Despite more tough talk from the Chancellor, this Government agreed at ECOFIN in December last year that a Community-wide withholding tax should be introduced. The proposal that the Commission has now brought forward, as instructed, would put at risk thousands of jobs. It would fatally undermine the City of London as an international financial centre. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd) said, it would drive the euro bond market out of London and

[Mr. John Whittingdale]

out of reach of the Commission to Zurich or New York. The Chancellor told us that he will not accept the withholding tax and said that he favoured the provision of information instead. That will suit the Commission fine, and the Chancellor will not need to use the veto on that because it is allowed for in the directive. However, it will not suit the City. For many, the compulsory provision of information would be worse than the withholding tax. It would add to the cost of doing business in London and its effect would be the same—it would drive business overseas. The Government should make it clear that neither a withholding tax nor the compulsory provision of information is acceptable and that any such proposal will be vetoed by the United Kingdom.

Another outcome of the ECOFIN meeting last December was the establishment of the code of conduct group, under the chairmanship of the Financial Secretary. We were told at the time that it was a great triumph for Britain and the Chancellor said that it would put us at the heart of the debate. What has it achieved? It has produced a list of 85 so-called harmful tax measures, although we are not allowed to know what those measures are. We are told that the Government are not prepared to place the document in the Library. I hope that the Financial Secretary will now say that she will do so, so that we can read it. We know that one of the measures on the list is the tax relief given to the British film industry. That relief was introduced by this Government, who trumpeted it at the time, and was welcomed by the industry. It has helped to attract more investment to film. I talked to the producer of "Waking Ned", a British film that is having considerable success. He told me that tax relief was a vital factor in helping him to raise the equity investment that he needed. However, according to the Financial Secretary's committee, it is a harmful tax measure and a distortion that must be removed.

Nothing that the Government have said this evening has done anything to reassure us. For all their tough talk, every sentence is hedged with qualifications and escape clauses. They have turned weasel words into an art form and the strong smell of fudge already surrounds the entire issue. The Prime Minister once said that he would never allow this country to be isolated or left behind in Europe. However, leadership sometimes requires one to be isolated and, on this issue, we are prepared to be isolated in Europe. If the Government's pledges mean anything, they should make it clear now that they will say no to harmonisation.

9.49 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Dawn Primarolo): I thank hon. Members for their condolences to my right hon. Friend the Chancellor and his family on the sad death of his father. I am sure that all hon. Members will share those sentiments.

In addition to dwelling on phrases such as "weasel words" and "fudge", and every other catch-phrase that is in the Tory party's brief for today, the hon. Member for Maldon and East Chelmsford (Mr. Whittingdale) talked about illusion and isolation.

The illusion is that Conservative Members do not want to understand, and do not believe, what is going on both in the debate here in the United Kingdom and in Europe. When the hon. Gentleman said that the Conservative party is happy to be isolated, we know that it is because it is completely isolated—isolated from the other place, from the electorate and from reality, it would appear from the contributions that we have heard today.

Let us be clear about the Government's position. Britain's way forward for Europe is the promotion of employment, economic reforms and competitive markets. The Government will not support any action that will threaten jobs or the competitive position of British business. That is nice and clear.

Tax matters coming before the Council, of course, require unanimous decisions. There is no question of tax changes being imposed on us, as was suggested by the right hon. Member for Fareham (Sir P. Lloyd). That suggestion is preposterous. Tax requires unanimity. Unanimity means all of the member states, including the United Kingdom.

If a proposal does not meet the test of national interest, we will oppose it and argue our case. If necessary, as my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said, and as my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has said before, we will be prepared to use the veto.

Mr. Swayne: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Dawn Primarolo: I shall not give way at this moment. I have only 10 minutes to answer all the accusations that have been made against the Government and, out of respect to the House, I should try to do that before any more accusations are made.

The Government believe that fair tax competition is a good thing. We support action to tackle unfair tax practices which distort competition in European economies.

I have the published conclusions from ECOFIN in November 1992, which met under the United Kingdom presidency with the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, now Lord Lamont, in the chair. It states:

"The Council endorses the concern expressed . . . about the effects of special tax arrangements designed to attract internationally mobile capital . . . resulting in the loss of revenue . . . and unfair competition; and believes that consideration is urgently needed of possible remedies to this problem".

Therefore, let us be clear tonight that it was the Conservative party that initiated the process that led to the code of conduct.

Now I briefly remind the House how we will apply our principles as spelt out by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the three specific areas raised in today's debate by the Opposition.

All European VAT matters are subject to agreement by all member states.

Mr. Bruce Grocott (Telford): Say it again, Dawn.

Dawn Primarolo: All member states.

We will honour our manifesto pledge on VAT. VAT on food, children's clothes, books, newspapers and public transport fares will remain zero rated. I remind the House that it was the Conservative party that agreed to a minimum VAT rate of 15 per cent. and an illustrious cast of Conservative Members endorsed that. On 2 July 1992, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer said that the

Government were committed to the harmonisation of indirect taxes in as far as that was necessary for the internal market.

The right hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley), that well-known pro-European, signed an explanatory memorandum to the House explaining why we should have the minimum rate—not a minimalist rate, or whatever it was the shadow Chancellor wanted to call it, not nearly a minimum rate, but a minimum rate. That, too, was endorsed by the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard). That well-known champion of Europe, the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), also signed the same memorandum when it came before the House. The right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) said, "Let's be minimalist about this." Conservative Members have been minimalist about the truth—nothing else.

There are no Community proposals on the table for corporation tax harmonisation. The Government will not sign up to anything that is not in Britain's national economic interest or that raises business costs and harms investment.

Mrs. Browning *rose—*

Dawn Primarolo: I will not give way to the hon. Lady. As a Minister in the previous Government, she knows what their policy was, although she has amnesia now. She is suffering under the same illusion and has forgotten their policy.

There is no evidence that we need harmonisation, nor is it clear what would be the benefits of launching into such an enormous project. With such widely varying corporation tax rates across Europe, we believe that tax harmonisation is a non-starter. There have been many quotes—from the Italian and Finnish Finance Ministers, the Spanish Prime Minister and even the French Prime Minister—making it clear that harmonisation of corporation tax rates is not on the agenda.

The rationale behind the withholding tax is prevention of tax evasion. I hope that that is a principle with which all parties in the House, even the Conservatives, can agree. The Government are committed to effective international action to prevent tax evasion and to protecting the competitiveness of the United Kingdom and European financial services industries. In particular, we have said that any future directive must exclude the eurobond market. The proposals as currently drafted are unacceptable. Any decision requires unanimity. I remind hon. Members that that means that everybody must be in favour, so the proposals cannot be changed unless their present form is improved.

The code of conduct aims to tackle harmful tax competition and, by doing so, would create the preconditions for healthy competition. We are helping to protect British jobs which are threatened by unfair subsidies abroad. The code of conduct uses two specific key criteria to decide what is harmful. The first and most important is that a measure must significantly affect the location of business activities in the Community. The second specifies that the potentially harmful measure has an effective level of taxation lower than general levels of taxation in that member state.

Under the terms of the code—voted for in European Standing Committee B—five measures in the United Kingdom tax system are on the list of measures that could fall into that category. That does not mean that they are harmful, and the group has yet to reach its conclusions. We do not believe that those measures are harmful and we have submitted a robust defence of them to the group. We are confident that they do not constitute harmful tax measures because all five satisfy the criteria for not being harmful; they are proportionate in their target— *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. There is far too much conversation. It should be borne in mind that this is an Opposition Supply day.

Dawn Primarolo: This is obviously too hard for Conservative Members to follow, because I am telling them what is really going on instead of talking about their illusions.

The Government are pursuing a clear agenda in Europe. It is about shaping a better Europe, engaging in debate and making sure that our best interests are represented—interests that Conservative Members cannot even recognise.

Question put, That the original words stand part of the Question:—

The House divided: Ayes 140, Noes 359.

Division No. 21] **[9.59 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Faber, David
Amess, David	Fabricant, Michael
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Atkinson, David *(Bour'mth E)*	Fox, Dr Liam
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Fraser, Christopher
Bercow, John	Gale, Roger
Beresford, Sir Paul	Garnier, Edward
Blunt, Crispin	Gibb, Nick
Body, Sir Richard	Gill, Christopher
Boswell, Tim	Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*	Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia	Gray, James
Brady, Graham	Green, Damian
Brazier, Julian	Greenway, John
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter	Grieve, Dominic
Browning, Mrs Angela	Gummer, Rt Hon John
Burns, Simon	Hague, Rt Hon William
Butterfill, John	Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Cash, William	Hammond, Philip
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*	Hawkins, Nick
	Hayes, John
Chope, Christopher	Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Clappison, James	Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*	Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
	Horam, John
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey	Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Collins, Tim	Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Colvin, Michael	Hunter, Andrew
Cormack, Sir Patrick	Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Cran, James	Jenkin, Bernard
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*	Key, Robert
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*	King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey	Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen	Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Duncan, Alan	Lansley, Andrew
Duncan Smith, Iain	Letwin, Oliver
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter	Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Evans, Nigel	Lidington, David

Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
McIntosh, Miss Anne
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Nigel Waterson.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Ballard, Jackie
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Hanson, David
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*

Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheerman, Barry
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Jane Kennedy.

Question accordingly negatived.

Question, That the proposed words be there added, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 31 (Questions on amendments):—*

The House divided: Ayes 316, Noes 161.

Division No. 22] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Co'try NE)*
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Begg, Miss Anne
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chaytor, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Tom *(Coatbridge)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cranston, Ross
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Co'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davis, Terry *(B'ham Hodge H)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Fyfe, Maria
Gapes, Mike
George, Bruce *(Walsall S)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Kevin *(Doncaster N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Illsley, Eric
Ingram, Adam
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie

(Welwyn Hatfield)
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malleber, Judy
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pollard, Kerry
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Cov'try NW)*
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Salter, Martin
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple–Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Derek *(Halton)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Wills, Michael
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. David Jamieson and Jane Kennedy.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Allan, Richard
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Ashdown, Rt Hon Paddy
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Ballard, Jackie
Barcow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Breed, Colin
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Burstow, Paul
Butterfill, John
Cable, Dr Vincent
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clifton–Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Donaldson, Jeffrey
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan, Alan
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fabricant, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gorrie, Donald
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Heathcoat–Amory, Rt Hon David
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Keetch, Paul
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Loughton, Tim
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Major, Rt Hon John
Maples, John
Mates, Michael
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Rendel, David

Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sanders, Adrian
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'd'ns)*
Soames, Nicholas
Spelman, Mrs Caroline
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Stunell, Andrew
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Wallace, James
Walter, Robert
Wardle, Charles
Webb, Steve
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Stephen Day and
Mr. Nigel Waterson.

Question accordingly agreed to.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *forthwith declared the main Question, as amended, to be agreed to.*

Resolved,

That this House recalls that the last Government's record on tax was one of broken promises, that it raised taxes 22 times having promised to cut taxes, including putting VAT on domestic fuel and power having specifically promised not to do so, and further that it tried to raise VAT on fuel to 17.5 per cent.; welcomes the fact that this Government has kept all of its promises on taxation, including its promises not to raise the basic or top rates of income tax and cutting VAT on fuel to 5 per cent.; and further welcomes the Government's approach to taxation at an international level, favouring fair tax competition, supporting concerted action at European level, including through the EU Code of Conduct Group, to deal with discriminatory and unfair tax practices that distort real competition, stating that it will not support measures that are not in Britain's national economic interest or that damage British business, harm investment and jobs, or damage Europe's competitiveness, and reiterating that it will retain the veto on tax issues and that decisions on tax will remain subject to unanimity.

Finance Act 1998 (Section 155)

10.25 pm

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Byers): I beg to move,

That the Code for Fiscal Stability, which was laid before this House on 3rd November, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

As the House will be aware, section 155 of the Finance Act 1998 requires the Government to lay before Parliament a code for fiscal stability. We have put the code on to a statutory basis because it will make policy more transparent and Governments readily answerable for any departure from the code.

The code requires the Government to apply five key principles to the formulation of fiscal and debt management policy. They are transparency, stability, responsibility, fairness and efficiency. Those principles are fundamental to a commonsense approach to fiscal management. By requiring Governments to specify objectives and rules that are consistent with those principles, the code will ensure that policy is set for the long-term benefit of the British economy.

The code sets out in detail how the Government will apply the five principles to the formulation of fiscal and debt management policy. The first principle is that of transparency. This requires the Government to publish enough information to allow the public to scrutinise both fiscal policy and the public finances. We believe that transparency will encourage Governments to plan for the long term and therefore encourage a more sustainable fiscal policy.

The principle of stability requires the Government to set fiscal policy in a way that is consistent with high and stable levels of growth and employment.

Responsible and prudent management of public assets, liabilities and fiscal risks is also fundamental to managing public finances in the long-term interests of the United Kingdom. The principle of responsibility means that Governments should plan and operate policy to ensure long-term sustainability and viability of public services.

The Government are committed to fairness both between and within generations. The principle of fairness means that it is important to take into account the financial effects of current fiscal policy on future generations.

The last principle that the code requires is that fiscal policy be set in accordance with the principle of efficiency. That means that Governments should not waste resources or cause resources to be wasted elsewhere. Value for money in the use of scarce resources is of prime importance if the UK is to achieve its social and economic goals.

The Government believe that those five principles are the appropriate basis for setting out our fiscal policy. The principle of transparency outlined in the code requires the Government to be open about their fiscal and debt management objectives and rules. That is in stark contrast to the Opposition who, when they were in government, changed their fiscal rules so that we were never sure whether they were able to meet them.

The Labour Government set out their fiscal rules in their first Budget in July 1997. The first is the golden rule that, over the economic cycle, the Government will borrow only to invest. The second is the sustainable

[Mr. Stephen Byers]

investment rule that public debt as a proportion of national income will be held over the economic cycle at a stable and prudent level.

Mr. Andrew Tyrie (Chichester): Is the Chief Secretary aware that the German Government and the Bundesbank have all but abandoned the golden rule? They have concluded that the golden rule is completely meaningless—indeed there has been a supreme court ruling in Germany to that effect—and it is no longer used as a tool of fiscal policy. Why, at the very time that the Germans, who more or less invented the golden rule, have abandoned it, have the Government decided to try to adopt it?

Mr. Byers: That appears to be an argument in favour of the harmonisation of golden rules. We shall not endorse that, just as we shall not endorse tax harmonisation. We believe that the argument is well made in respect of the United Kingdom. If the hon. Gentleman wants to present the counter-argument, he is perfectly entitled to do so. It is for the German Government to make their own decisions on those matters; in this case, it is not a decision that we would have made ourselves.

Mr. Tyrie: Will the Chief Secretary give way?

Mr. Byers: No. The debate is a short one and many hon. Members will want to speak on an issue as important as section 155 of the Finance Act 1998. I know that many Opposition Members are eager to participate in the debate and, as always, I want to provide the opportunity for as many Back Benchers as possible to speak. The hon. Gentleman is perfectly entitled to try to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I certainly look forward to hearing his pearls of wisdom.

I had better quit while I am ahead and return to the subject of the two fiscal rules being operated by the Government. Those rules are consistent with the principles outlined in the code. Parliament and the public will have available to them the information needed to assess our performance against those rules.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): I welcome my right hon. Friend's setting out of the code, so that we know exactly what it means and what it implies. However, we had an economic forecast at the time of the Budget, in July, and at the time of the autumn statement. Is it the intention to have those three forecasts on a similar basis?

Mr. Byers: Later, I shall outline the publications that we intend to make available to ensure that we meet the principle of transparency, to which I referred earlier. At that point, I shall address my right hon. Friend's question.

The Government believe that we have put in place a coherent framework and set firm fiscal operating rules. We tightened fiscal policy soon after coming into office, reducing borrowing by £20 billion last year. That has re-established sound public finances in the United Kingdom. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said on 3 November, our cautious and prudent approach to the public finances means that, even with more moderate growth next year, we are on track to meet our tough fiscal rules.

Following the fiscal tightening last year, we expect a surplus on the current budget this year and over the current cycle. The expected surplus on the current budget this year contrasts with deficits in all but three of the past 25 years. In addition, the ratio of debt to national income is expected to fall below 40 per cent. from next year.

The principle of transparency defined in the code requires transparency in setting debt management policy as well. The Government's objective for debt management is laid down in the code for fiscal stability. The objective is to minimise over the long term the cost of meeting the Government's financing needs, without taking undue risks with, or hindering the operation of, monetary policy.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): The Chief Secretary says that he intends to bring down the level of debt to less than 40 per cent. of gross domestic product but, under the previous Government, it reached a low point of only 28 per cent. of GDP. When will the right hon. Gentleman reach that figure?

Mr. Byers: Regrettably, that low point occurred some years ago and, on 1 May last year, the figure was well over 40 per cent. Our objective is to reduce it to below that figure, as I explained.

An important feature of the code, following the principle of transparency, is the reporting arrangements that it lays down. Those arrangements will improve the ability of Parliament and the public to scrutinise fiscal and debt management policy. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) said, we have already foreshadowed that we will make three specific publications available as a result of the key transparency principle.

There will be a statutory requirement to produce a pre-Budget report, which will include proposals for consideration in the Budget. A financial statement and Budget report will report on Budget measures and economic and fiscal projections, and an economic and fiscal strategy report will set out the Government's long-term strategy and assess short-term outcomes against objectives. The code also requires the Government to publish—

Mr. Sheldon: When will the last report be published? Will it be in July?

Mr. Byers: At this stage, the Government do not want to be pinned down to any specific month. Our intentions are transparent in terms of the publications, but that does not mean that we have to announce six months in advance precisely when they will be published. We want to be in a position to publish reports when it is appropriate to do so—which is what we will do.

The code requires the Government to publish each year a debt management report on the structure of their borrowing. That report will give the public sufficient information to allow scrutiny of the debt management policy. I believe that those reporting requirements are a major step forward in transparency and scrutiny. Never before have such demanding requirements been made of a British Government. Clear objectives will be set and there will be an honest assessment each year of progress against those objectives. Unlike the previous Government, we will ensure that the objectives are met.

Transparency and prudence are the key themes of the new fiscal framework. That is why the code formalises the role of the National Audit Office in auditing any changes to the key assumptions underlying the public finances forecast. The National Audit Office has already audited those assumptions and found them to be "reasonable". The code ensures that the National Audit Office will continue to play a key role in the Budget process.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Given that there were changes to the assumptions used in the November pre-Budget report, can the right hon. Gentleman explain why no auditor's report was released before that pre-Budget report when one was produced in March and November last year and in March this year?

Mr. Byers: The National Audit Office will undoubtedly comment on the changes that were introduced. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that they were implemented to ensure that we complied with the European standards on accounting introduced in 1995. They are perfectly in order and the National Audit Office will report on them in due course. It is no secret that the changes were made to meet those 1995 requirements, which is perfectly understandable.

High-quality information is the basis for good decision making, so the code requires the Government to use best-practice accounting methods. A key element of that is the adoption of resource accounting and budgeting, which will help with planning and accounting for the resources used by Government.

This Government were elected because we promised to modernise Britain—a modernisation that was long overdue. We inherited an economy with fundamental weaknesses: a poor record of productivity and investment and a constant cycle of boom and bust that had afflicted our economy for too long. In the past 20 years, we have endured the two worst recessions on record and an unsustainable boom. Over the past 10 years, no European Union country has suffered as much instability as the United Kingdom.

Our first task on taking office last year was to put in place the building blocks for stability. It is only through stability that individuals and businesses can plan with confidence for the future so that we can achieve the higher levels of growth and employment that we all want to see. We took action immediately on coming to office by giving the Bank of England independence in setting interest rates.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the Chief Secretary tell the House at what stage drafts of the pre-Budget report were circulated to his Cabinet colleagues? The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry was ignorant of important features of the report when he appeared before the Trade and Industry Committee on 4 November, 48 hours after the report's publication.

Mr. Byers: I am beginning to regret giving way to the hon. Gentleman. I was pleased when he received the Back Bencher of the year award a couple of weeks ago. It does not need to be returned. I told him that it was well deserved. He made an amusing speech about being picked up by the political sketch writer of *The Guardian* for splitting his infinitives. I can tell him that there are a few Labour Members who would gladly split his infinitives.

I honestly cannot remember exactly when the drafts were circulated. It was a few weeks ago. I am sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry is never ignorant about such matters. He is always perfectly on message, as we know.

I was talking about giving the Bank of England independence in setting interest rates and I thought that that was why the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow) wanted to intervene. Interest rate decisions are now made in the long-term interests of the economy, not for short-term political gain. As a result, long-term interest rates have fallen to their lowest level for 35 years, which is a clear demonstration of the credibility of the new monetary framework. People and businesses can plan ahead and invest with greater confidence, knowing that high and damaging inflation episodes of the past will not be repeated.

Just as we had to put in place a new monetary framework, we also had to put in place a new framework for fiscal policy. The previous Government's fiscal policy led to a record deficit of £50 billion and, over the previous economic cycle, they had a current budget deficit of £149 billion. Their fiscal policy was made behind closed doors and lacked openness and predictability, which made worse the problems of instability. As with monetary policy, we have introduced a new framework for fiscal policy that is based on an open, transparent and accountable approach.

That is the right way forward for fiscal policy. It is vital for economic stability that public finances are managed responsibly and prudently. The code for fiscal stability will ensure that the Government can live up to the tough standards of fiscal practice imposed on them. I commend the code to the House.

10.42 pm

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): The Finance Act 1998, which followed this year's Budget, is one of the longest ever. It was presented to the House in two volumes. Now that it has become law, it has been consolidated into a single volume of more than 400 pages, costing £28.

The Act would have been even longer, and the tome even heavier, if it had included all the taxation measures announced in the Budget, but unfortunately many of them are to be implemented by secondary legislation. For example, the change to corporation tax, which will require accelerated payments from big companies, will be set out in statutory instruments that will never become before the House for scrutiny. That is a scandal, but it means that the Act is not as long as it could have been.

The Act is so long partly because it contains many gimmicks instead of the substance of tax changes. One of those gimmicks is before the House this evening. Section 155 imposes no obligation on the Government beyond a requirement that they should present to the House a code for fiscal stability. A code for fiscal stability already exists. Indeed, the Government published the first one in November 1997, so what is gained by having this one presented to the House? Presumably, a code published by the Government was to be observed by the Government anyway. Nothing is gained by this debate.

The code imposes no rules or discipline on the Government. That became clear from the Chief Secretary's speech. Even the golden rule, which he did

[Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory]

mention and of which the Chancellor has been very proud, is not included in the code for fiscal stability. The new document contains no obligation on the Government to abide by any fiscal rules. The Chief Secretary was very unconvincing in his reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) about the golden rule, but the Chancellor believes very strongly in it. The idea that the Government should borrow only for investment prompts the question of what is to be categorised as investment. There are many examples of the Government reclassifying expenditure as capital expenditure to get around or obey the golden rule.

We conclude either that the Government do not believe that they can keep to the golden rule, and that is why it is not in the code, or—this is more likely—the entire exercise is to create the illusion of financial responsibility and prudence, while in practice they do nothing whatsoever to enforce it. The code will undoubtedly be approved at the end of the debate, but I hope that Back Benchers are aware that this is an entirely vacuous undertaking. It is yet another example of the triumph of spin and presentation over substance and reality.

Even if we take the code as a sort of general guide to action and as a collection of suggestions, the Government are breaking the few suggestions that it contains. They are in breach of the principles for fiscal stability enunciated in the code. The word "prudence" litters the code. Poor old prudence—she is usually wheeled out by Treasury Ministers when they want to cover up some especially reckless affair.

How is it prudent to take a growth forecast for next year, as the Government have, which is so much higher than that of independent analysts and commentators? The Government have done the same for the year after, too. Independent forecasters are predicting that growth in 2000 will be no more than 1.6 per cent. Why is it that the Government have chosen a growth target for that year of 2.5 per cent.? That is higher than they were predicting in the summer. What is prudent about that? How is it right to take a prediction in which no one else believes?

Even the Confederation of British Industry is now talking about a black hole in the public finances. Earlier this week, the director general of the CBI said that the Government risk finding a

"black hole in public finances"

unless they can reduce demand for increases in social security spending, health and education. Instead of being prudent, in line with the code for fiscal stability, the Government are being reckless.

Let us consider the treatment of unemployment, and the cost of it in published documents. Everyone agrees that the level of unemployment is a crucial determinant of public expenditure, especially the social security budget. In the comprehensive spending review in July, the Government estimated that unemployment would be flat at the April 1998 level. Why, four months later, in the pre-Budget report that was published just a few weeks ago, has that suddenly been changed? Suddenly, unemployment is predicted at the September 1998 level. Accordingly, social security expenditure has been reduced.

We all know that the unemployment figure in September was probably the low point. No one outside the Treasury seriously believes that unemployment will not rise in the coming months. Indeed, it has already started to rise. Why therefore pretend in the pre-Budget report that it is realistic to hold unemployment and spending on benefits for the unemployed at that September level?

The code of fiscal stability talks about prudence, responsibility and transparency. Will the Chief Secretary explain how it is prudent or responsible or transparent to lock in at a wholly unrealistic prediction of social security expenditure, based on the low point in the unemployment cycle? If he cannot tell us now, will he confirm now or later that, when unemployment starts to rise, he will revise upward his estimates of social security expenditure?

That leads directly to the mystery of the National Audit Office involvement. As the Chief Secretary said, the National Audit Office is asked to comment on key assumptions, especially on whether any assumptions have been changed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) pointed out, the National Audit Office commented on the Government's first Budget of July 1997, their pre-Budget statement of November 1997 and their Budget in March 1998 but not—suddenly and mysteriously—the pre-Budget statement that they presented to the House last month.

Not only has the NAO suddenly stopped auditing the assumptions, but doing so breaches the code for fiscal stability. It is written very clearly on page 4 of the code, which the House is invited to approve, that the Government will

"invite the National Audit Office to audit changes in the key assumptions and conventions underpinning the fiscal projections".

That is repeated and expanded upon on page 10. Yet there was no National Audit Office audit of last month's figures.

The Chief Secretary rather lamely said that he expected that the NAO would take some interest in the figures—but that is not the point. The code for fiscal stability requires that the Government ask the NAO to audit such changes. I have just pointed out changes to key assumptions; I described the one affecting unemployment. Assuming that it will be flat at the April level is a major change in the assumptions, yet the National Audit Office has not been invited to comment on it. I wonder why not. Actually, I do not wonder why not. I know the answer, and shall tell the House.

In July 1997, the Government made an unemployment assumption of 1.65 million claimants, which was examined in considerable detail by the National Audit Office. The Comptroller and Auditor General reported on that, and went into the fact that the Government's assumption corresponded to similar estimates made by outside commentators. He concluded, on page 8 of his report:

"As a level assumption for claimant unemployment, the figure of 1.65 million would seem consistent with the available independent assessments of unemployment prospects."

In other words, the Comptroller and Auditor General very carefully compared the Government's figure with outside assessments. He concluded that it was a reasonable assumption, and he listed at the back of the report the names of all the outside commentators and forecasters whose views he had taken into account.

The reason the Government have not done the same for the latest pre-Budget report is that their latest unemployment assumption is plainly ludicrous. As I

mentioned, it is now down to 1.3 million—the September level—but none of those independent forecasters could be brought to believe, or could be induced to suggest, that the figure was anything but a temporary phenomenon and, I am afraid, set to rise. Everyone outside the Treasury knows that unemployment is already rising. That is why the National Audit Office has not been asked to do its checks on the pre-Budget statement, already in contravention of the code of fiscal stability.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I understand that the right hon. Gentleman used to be a Treasury Minister, I do not recall exactly when. When he was a Treasury Minister, was the practice on assumptions about unemployment to use a consensus of estimates, or to assume level unemployment?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: We made estimates of unemployment, and they turned out to be correct. The hon. Gentleman knows that the golden economic legacy that we bequeathed to the Government included falling unemployment, in addition to stable inflation and steady growth. Therefore, we were absolutely right to estimate, in our published documents, that expenditure on that part of social security was falling. We published our forecasts, and they turned out to be right. The Government have published their forecasts and already, a month later, they are shown to be unrealistic.

However, I am arguing that the Government, by failing to invite the National Audit Office to audit their assumptions, are breaching the rules, not only of common sense, but of their own code of fiscal stability, which they are inviting the House to approve tonight.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): One of the key determinants of the assumption on tax receipts is the assumption relating to economic growth, and the audited assumption is the trend GDP. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is interesting that, between the Budget in March and the pre-Budget report in November, the Treasury did not update its assumption relating to trend GDP, or its assumption relating to economic growth, as it did with the unemployment count, because that might have led to a reduction, and a challenge to the Government's assumption about future tax receipts?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: My hon. Friend has spotted another—and glaring—flaw. There is an asymmetry. The Treasury does not alter its assumptions if they help the Government's case on the revenue side, but it does alter the assumptions when they flatter the expenditure forecasts.

The disturbing aspect of all this is the fact that the Comptroller and Auditor General, who knows perfectly well what is going on, has suddenly been frozen out of the entire process. The series of NAO reports, going back to the first Budget, has suddenly been stopped; and yet, bizarrely, it is a written requirement in the code of fiscal stability that such a report be produced. I hope that the Minister who replies to the debate will explain to the House, before we approve this ludicrous document, exactly how the Government expect to get away with breaking the rules before the ink is dry on the documents.

Not only unemployment assumptions are changed; there is an effect on social security expenditure generally, the forecasts for which have been reduced between the July figures, the comprehensive spending review and the pre-Budget statement figures produced last month. The total of those social security expenditure forecasts is now lower by £7 billion over the next three years. Why was not that figure audited by the National Audit Office?

I believe that we are getting near to an answer when we detect a division between one part of the Government and another. My hon. Friend the Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton asked the Economic Secretary why the NAO had, apparently, not been asked to audit the figures. He received the following startling answer:

"The assumptions and conventions . . . in the pre-Budget report were unchanged".

We have already discussed how the unemployment assumptions clearly have been changed. Help for this view comes from an unexpected quarter. I asked the Secretary of State for Social Security why it was that there had been this rather dramatic cut in social security expenditure projections. The right hon. Gentleman helpfully confirmed to me:

"Revisions to the forecast of social security expenditure published in the pre-Budget report reflect new information about caseloads and economic assumptions."

There we have it. The Treasury thinks that there are no changes in the economic assumptions and we all know that there have been. To be fair to the Secretary of State for Social Security, he also understands that there have been those changes. Again, can those on the Treasury Bench explain themselves? We have an interesting split between the Treasury and the Department of Social Security and we need to get to the bottom of it.

At least one of the answers that we have received is misleading. They cannot both be true. Either there have been changes to economic assumptions or there have not. Either the Treasury is telling the truth or the Department of Social Security is. Someone is misleading the House. The Minister who replies to the debate owes the House an explanation.

I can well understand why the Government are so sensitive about these forecasts of social security expenditure. We all remember the broken promises, and what the Prime Minister said bears repeating. The right hon. Gentleman said that

"as we get the welfare bills down . . . then we can release more money into education and health".

So first there would be cuts in social security, then extra expenditure on education and health. That is one of the promises that went out of the window in the first few months. I cannot remember which happened first. Was it the sacking of the then Minister for Welfare Reform or was it that the Government published an estimate for social security expenditure requiring an extra £37.5 billion on the budget over the next three years—almost as much as the additional expenditure that they promised for health and education combined?

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): Will the right hon. Gentleman take the opportunity to let us know what exactly he proposes to cut from the social security budget?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: I am asking the Government for no more than what we achieved. In the last three years of the Conservative Government, and in the expenditure targets that we left behind, social security expenditure in total rose by only 1.5 per cent. I am asking the

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Government to continue with our record. Instead, they have published figures showing that, in the next three years, social security expenditure will rise by more than 3 per cent. every year in real terms. I am not asking the Government to do the impossible. I am asking them instead simply to continue the record of controlling expenditure that the Conservative Government achieved in practice.

Mr. Webb: Presumably the only relevant comparison would be non-cyclical social security spending over each of the Parliaments. Since 1979, every Conservative Parliament increased social security spending by more than the Labour Government plan to.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The figures which I have quoted come from the Library. The Government may be frightened of submitting their figures to the National Audit Office but I am not frightened of my figures being audited, checked and verified by the Library. I shall gladly pass over to the hon. Gentleman after the debate the figures that set out the record that we achieved in practice and left behind in the expenditure targets, which the Government said that they were taking over from us. The document states that the object is

"to allow the public to scrutinise the conduct of fiscal policy".

That is a laudable aim, which I share, but what would a member of the public find if he attempted to do so? He would be met by a blizzard of changed statistics. Familiar and tested measurements of the public accounts have been renamed. The public sector borrowing requirement, familiar to all of us, has suddenly become the public sector net cash requirement. The control total, which was effective in controlling public expenditure, including social security, when we were in office, has been abolished. Privatisation has become the public-private partnership, and we discovered earlier today that tax harmonisation in Europe is to become tax co-ordination in Europe.

Changing all the terms does not aid transparency. The figures have not changed, but a smokescreen has been thrown before members of the public who seek to discover what has happened to their money under Government control.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Accountants have changed their means of accounting at least 10 times in my lifetime. Will the right hon. Gentleman remind the House how many times the previous Government changed the means of recording unemployment figures?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: The hon. Gentleman is wrong, because we did not change the definitions in the public accounts or the published documents. We held to the definitions that existed when we took office and we always accounted to the public, transparently, against the previous year's figures. The Government are now recasting the public finances so that they are incomprehensible to a lay reader, despite the obligation in the code for fiscal stability to make the information understandable to the taxpaying public.

I shall give a specific example. My hypothetical member of the public might want to know what had happened to what is now called annually managed expenditure. That is the element in the public accounts that comes under each departmental heading but is under the control of the relevant Secretary of State. The member of the public would find, on page 107 of the comprehensive spending review, that the third biggest departmental item is "Accounting and other adjustments". That is not a trivial sum, because it amounts to £20 billion in the third year. Is it transparent to hide expenditure of that magnitude under that heading?

As someone lucky enough to be a Member of Parliament, I have tabled a parliamentary question to find out what is included under that general heading. I found—surprise, surprise—that the largest item is social security expenditure. It is that part of the working families tax credit that the Government do not wish to show up as mainstream social security expenditure. Why have the Government sought to disguise the full level of social security expenditure? They must be embarrassed by their failure to control the welfare state and they have resorted to fiddled statistics to try to disguise what has happened.

The code contains some permitted exemptions from the transparency principle. The Government need not provide information in a transparent form if it would harm national security or if it would damage the Government's ability to undertake commercial activities. Will the Chief Secretary tell the House under which heading he claims exemption from the transparency principle when disguising a large element of social security expenditure under the heading "Accounting and other adjustments"?

Mr. Jim Cousins (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): Does the right hon. Gentleman think that mortgage tax relief should be reclassified as housing expenditure, or that tax relief on pensions should be reclassified as social security expenditure? Does he think that the distinction between current and capital is a useful one in the public accounts?

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: We are talking here about a social security benefit. This is a welfare benefit and it should be classified as such. If the Government wish to take out part of that and show it as a different line, let them do that. Is the hon. Gentleman seriously claiming that it is part of the transparency principle not to describe it as in any way connected with the working families tax credit, but to bury it as an accounting or other adjustment?

The code, and the whole of section 155, is an exercise in posturing. It places no real disciplines or obligations on the Government. Even if it can be taken as a suggestion of some general principles, the Government have already broken them, in the way that I have described.

To some extent, this is a useful debate. To that extent, perhaps it is a useful guide; not for what it requires from the Government, but for what it tells us about the Government. Instead of the principles of transparency, stability, responsibility, fairness and efficiency, we are increasingly finding from the Government an opaque treatment of unstable accounts, presented in an irresponsible manner, unfair to the tax-paying public and inefficient to the economy at large.

By all means, let the Government publish this code and let them try to prove the opposite, but they will be found out. They will be judged not on the code or on what they say, but by what they do in practice. There is a large and growing gap between the Government's rhetoric and what they do in practice. The publication of the code simply goes to show that that is the case.

11.12 pm

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): As my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) has just said, the code for fiscal stability is a load of rubbish. My right hon. Friend put it more politely. He described it as misleading spin. However, it is more than just misleading; it is dangerously misleading.

Principle 3a is transparency, but the code is the opposite of transparency. As my right hon. Friend said, the golden rule, which the code does not mention, but which the Chief Secretary did, lies behind the whole concept of fiscal probity. The golden rule is probably the most muddling, obscure and spin-infested concept that one could imagine.

First, it is wrong and misleading because the distinction between capital and current spending in public expenditure is false.

Mr. Cousins: What!

Sir Michael Spicer: If the hon. Gentleman allows me to develop my point, I shall happily give way to him. We debate matters happily on the Select Committee on the Treasury, so we can do so in the House for once.

The Government recognise that the distinction is misleading, because, as has been said, they keep on reclassifying capital and current spending. The blur is there, and the Government know it. It is misleading because, as we all know, there is a direct connection between decisions on capital spending and decisions on current spending. That link has been recognised for many years. A capital expenditure programme is started, and the current expenditure flows along behind it. Roads may be classified in one case as capital spending, although not always, and maintenance as current spending, and the same applies to hospitals. The distinction is a false one.

The fundamental point as to why the matter is so confusing is that all public spending has to be funded in the same way. Whether it is capital or current spending, public spending is funded through taxation or by borrowing. The macro-economic effects are therefore the same.

In the late summer, the Government said that they would spend £40 billion more than they had originally intended—on health and education—but would magically balance the books on current account. The Budget forecast was couched entirely in terms of balancing the books on current account. That was the spin, but they slipped in a footnote that the total deficit on public spending would go up by £11 billion in the next two or three years.

The measure is so dangerous because the whole thing is presented through the fiscal code and the golden rule by using mirrors—in a way that obscures what is going on with public spending and the public borrowing requirement in particular, which is going up strongly. The Government keep talking about having been frightfully careful with the public finances over the past couple of years, but they have failed to say that they inherited and stuck with Conservative policies—unashamedly, but to the embarrassment of their Back Benchers.

We are now out at sea with Labour. Public spending is going up—no doubt the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne, Central (Mr. Cousins) would approve of that—but the Government cannot have it both ways. Public borrowing is also forecast to go up. The false distinction between current and capital accounts in terms of public spending is helping to obscure that from the public, and it is therefore dangerous.

Mr. Desmond Swayne (New Forest, West): Does my hon. Friend agree that what matters is not whether an arbitrary distinction is made about current or capital spending so much as whether capital expenditure has sufficient return to repay the initial investment? If that is not the case, the golden rule is no more than rust.

Sir Michael Spicer: My hon. Friend makes a good point. Most public spending does not have such a rate of return.

The Government's problem is that they may be deceiving themselves about the so-called golden rule. They have divided up fiscal and monetary policy in such a way that they have been forced into this position on fiscal policy. In reality—as opposed to the spin and this golden rule idea, which may even be deceiving the Government, let alone the public—public expenditure, and with it the borrowing requirement, is going up. That is the small print in the Government's own document.

The monetary authority—the Bank of England—is being asked in statute to keep inflation at 2.5 per cent., although fiscal policy is becoming more profligate and pushing up inflation. As some of us keep reminding the Governor when he appears before the Treasury Committee—much to the embarrassment of some of my Labour colleagues—the Bank is charged specifically and overwhelmingly with keeping inflation at that level. Everything else is subsidiary.

The bank is bound by law, therefore, to keep interest rates higher than they would otherwise be, because of profligacy and perhaps because of the Government's self-deception about the golden rule. Such self-deception is dangerous. Keeping interest rates at such a level will be economically disastrous for the country. The only good news is that the public will start to rumble the Government, and their position will be eaten into.

Although it would be good news if the Government were undermined by all this, such deception—or self-deception—on fiscal policy, fed through the Bank of England on interest rates, has the makings of immediate economic disaster as we face a recessionary period. That is why the code of practice is not merely a con; it is dangerous, and should be exposed and resisted.

11.20 pm

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Unlike the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) and his colleagues, the Liberal Democrats welcome the code for fiscal stability. The Conservative party's view on this issue is not consistent. When it was in government, it believed that there should be a clear framework for setting economic policy. Some of us remember the publication of the medium-term financial strategy. The economic theory that underpinned that framework is not dissimilar to the economic theory underpinning this code for fiscal stability. One no longer expects consistency from the modern Conservative party.

However, I agreed with the right hon. Member for Wells that there is nothing new in the code. I studied the document with anticipation, because, having read the

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Prime Minister's speech at the Lord Mayor's banquet, in which he expressed his new-found excitement and desire for stability, I thought that there might be something new in it, but I suppose that a code of fiscal stability should not change too much. That is the benefit of it: it gives clarity to economic policy and reduces uncertainty, which helps the public and the House to hold the Government to account for their economic policies.

That is the theory, and it is, in principle, a good way forward. However, I share some of the concerns of the right hon. Member for Wells, because it is not the theory but the practice that matters. We have yet to see the worth and substance behind the code, and we shall be able to measure that properly only when we see what the Government will do when the chips are down. Will they revert to the practice of the previous Government, who fiddled the figures when they did not turn out as they had predicted, or will they rely on the independent auditors? Will they ensure that the figures they put before the House have wide acceptance?

Concern was expressed about the recent pre-Budget report. There were arguments over the growth forecasts, which did not relate to the consensus reached by external forecasters, and there was anxiety that the Government will not be quite as up front and honest as the principles outlined in the code suggest.

We shall give the Government the benefit of the doubt for the moment. We urge them to make progress on some of the points in the code. Page 7 of the code refers to accounting practice:

"The Government shall, as soon as reasonably practicable, adopt a Resource Accounting and Budgeting approach for planning".

I am pleased that the Chief Secretary mentioned that in his opening remarks. I hope that those plans for a new form of accounting will be implemented as soon as possible, because they are vital for the objectives of the fiscal code.

Resource accounting and budgeting will, for the very first time, provide the House and the public with the information that we need to assess whether the Government are promoting fiscal stability and are taking good care of the public purse.

I disagree with the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer). I have not heard anything so ridiculous in a debate for some time. There is a clear distinction between capital and current spending. There is an economic difference between a building and a pay cheque, and between a battleship and a benefits cheque. The Conservative Front Bench contains some former distinguished accountants. I hope that, when the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) winds up the debate, he will confirm that the private sector is used to making those important distinctions. It is about time that the public accounts also made those distinctions.

Mr. Lansley: Would the hon. Gentleman care to reflect on the point that he has just made? A battleship is an asset that is used but offers no economic return, whereas revenue expenditure on education may be construed as having a direct economic return. Which of those two should be capitalised in a firm's accounts?

Mr. Davey: There is obviously a difference. It clearly makes sense to budget on a cash flow basis for large sums that are consumed over a period of years. A battleship has value over its lifetime, and there is no reason why the accounts should not reflect that.

It is time that the House had access to the sort of meaningful information that would be provided by resource accounting and budgeting. I am astonished that the Conservatives should talk about the sovereignty of the House in terms of the European debate. When they were in government, they failed to produce information of the kind that the House needs to hold the Government to account. The House does an appalling job in holding the Executive to account over the spending of billions of pounds of taxpayers' money; but the Conservatives, when they were in power, failed to provide the House with the information that we need in order to hold the Executive to account. That was a lamentable failure.

The Conservatives talk about sovereignty, and about defending the rights of the House. When they were in office, they did nothing to enable the House to do its job properly.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I find the hon. Gentleman's argument interesting. How would he propose to strengthen the ability of the House—particularly that of Select Committees—to bring the Government to account? In fact, we do not scrutinise any accounts in this place, do we? They all go through on the nod, when no one is here. It happened for years under the Conservatives. Only when the then Opposition called votes—as we often did, until 3 am: unfortunate people were having to vote every 15 minutes—did we actually vote on the accounts. We did it just to keep hon. Members here: we did not do it in order to scrutinise the Government. *[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) has probably finished his intervention.

Mr. Davey: I am grateful for the intervention, which enables me to draw hon. Members' attention to a report that will soon be forthcoming from the Select Committee on Procedure—a Committee of which, for my sins, I am a member. We are reporting to the House on financial procedure, and on financial reporting to the House.

A number of issues will feature in our report. It relates to information, and resource accounting budgeting will go some way towards providing that. It relates to resources for Select Committees. It relates to changing procedures in the House to enable it to vote on Select Committee reports that have examined departmental spending programmes. A change in procedures and information could enable the House to hold the Executive to account far more effectively.

Let me add a rider. I do not think that this will appear in the Select Committee's report, but we need to change the political system—the rules of our political culture in the United Kingdom. I believe that proportional representation would be very effective in enabling the House to bring the Executive to account.

If the next code for fiscal stability really does develop my theme of resource accounting and budgeting, that will take the fiscal framework much further. Let me say to the Chief Secretary that I hope that that theme will be linked with the public service agreements which I believe that he is soon to announce. I think it very important for those

targets to be linked with the accounts, so that the House can see the targets in the context of the money that it votes to the Executive. There is a link there, which follows from the principles of transparency and efficiency that are embedded in the code.

Having praised the Government to some extent, let me add that there are some shortcomings, some of which were mentioned in the Standing Committee that gave rise to this discussion of section 155 of the Act. Those shortcomings are still germane, and I hope that the Government will produce better codes in future. The main point, however, is that there is still no link with the environment—no link with sustainable development. Clearly, sustainable development is connected with fiscal stability, and it should be at the heart of Government economic policy.

Recently, the Deputy Prime Minister published a document called "Sustainability Counts"—and a very good document it is. My only concern is that it was launched by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, not by Her Majesty's Treasury. If the environment is going to be put at the heart of government, such documents should come from the Chancellor of the Exchequer. That would be a case of joined-up thinking.

The Deputy Prime Minister's foreword to the document states:

"The Government is committed to a new way of thinking. One which puts environmental, social and economic concerns alongside each other at the heart of decision making."

That is absolutely right. It continues:

"We are used to judging the economy's performance on the basis of statistics such as GDP, inflation and employment figures. I want these broader 'quality of life' headline indicators, over time, to become just as useful and familiar."

That is why they should be in the code. The code refers to gross domestic product, to inflation and to employment. I hope that, in due course, the code will refer to those other indicators, which the Deputy Prime Minister at least thinks are important.

Another aspect of that document is directly linked to fiscal stability. One of the headline indicators proposed by the Deputy Prime Minister is social investment. That is introduced in the document with these words:

"Sustainable development means living off our income, not eroding our capital base, so that we are not storing up problems for future generations. Especially important is investment in 'public' assets which benefit everyone."

The Deputy Prime Minister was right. The previous Government eroded social investment, ran down public assets and reduced public wealth in an attempt to create an economic golden legacy, but we knew that just switching things from the public to the private sector did not necessarily create any wealth.

I am not suggesting that privatisation was not a good thing in many industries, but it did not create any new wealth; it just switched ownership. The headline indicators in that document could usefully be incorporated into the code.

There is another shortcoming in the way in which the codes are being framed. They do not talk much about the role of fiscal policy in economic management—how it can be used counter-cyclically, and how, within a single currency, it could, as we heard earlier, take a proactive, not a passive, role in the national economic management of the United Kingdom.

The final shortcoming is that such a code and the documents that it requires a Government to publish, particularly economic and financial projections, will not be updated just before a general election. One of the benefits of the code is that it enables us and the general public to hold the Government to account, so what more important time do we need the code to be updated and published? We need it just before a general election.

History shows us why we need the code to be published at that time. In 1992, I had the pleasure of being economics adviser to my right hon. Friend the Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith). We were analysing the pre-election Budget, which was published by one of my predecessors, now Lord Lamont. He had published the Budget two days before the general election was called in 1992. In that Budget, he introduced the 20p income tax rate, and published a public sector borrowing requirement of £20 billion.

That was not audited. It was much disputed and debated during the general election. When the Conservatives managed to scrape back, unfortunately, after the 1992 election, they changed the PSBR within a few months. It magically went up from £20 billion to £50 million. That is why we need such codes, and why we need them to be published just before elections—so that the British people can vote on facts, not on fatuous made-up figures from the Executive.

The code borrows from an innovation from New Zealand. It borrows many of the ideas in its Fiscal Responsibility Act 1994, but the one lesson that it has not borrowed is the requirement to publish the code just before a general election. That is one reason why Liberal Democrats, although for the moment we are prepared to give the Government the benefit of the doubt, remain sceptical about how they will use the code. If the code is merely an illusion—that was the charge made by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), from the Conservative Benches—it will be a great disappointment. There is the potential for a significant innovation in economic policy. If it is missed, it will be a great shame.

There is room to extend the concepts contained within the code. Independent auditing of the assumptions behind other Budgets would help. For example, could the Audit Commission review the local government grant settlement and study the assumptions behind that? Could it establish whether the resources that the Government provide to councils—obviously, I have Kingston council in mind—are sufficient for them to meet their statutory obligations? For many councils, I very much doubt it. If we could extend the concept of the fiscal code to such areas, it would be welcome.

I hope that the code will be developed and improved in the years ahead, and that the Chief Secretary will respond positively about how he views the code and its future.

11.36 pm

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): Conservative Members have been sceptical as to whether the code for fiscal stability" will achieve anything. In the hope that it

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might, I remind the Chief Secretary to the Treasury that paragraph 19 of the code mentions an economic and fiscal strategy report and promises that it should

"present illustrative projections of the outlook for the key fiscal aggregates for a period not less than 10 years into the future, based on a range of plausible assumptions."

The subsequent paragraph states that the report should provide

"an analysis of the risks surrounding the economic and fiscal outlook, including Government decisions and other circumstances that have still to be quantified".

Finally, paragraph 22 states:

"The financial statements shall also include any other such indicator as is required to judge . . . the Government's European commitments".

We are talking about projections and, if those are to include assumptions on Government policy, they must include the policy assumption that this Government intend to join the euro. Therefore, will the Chief Secretary acknowledge that the projections to be published under the code will show the effects on fiscal policy of joining the euro?

I wonder whether the Treasury is aware of a study undertaken by Oxford Economic Forecasting last December, which used the Treasury forecasting model to study what would happen if we joined the euro in 1999. It clearly showed that, because of the dramatic cut in interest rates that would be required for us to join, there would have to be a corresponding increase in general taxation, equivalent at that time to a rise of 3p in the standard rate of income tax.

The stability of our economy is not provided for by a code; it is rooted in the balance and structure of our economy. As that report pointed out last year, in this country, mortgage debt is nearly 60 per cent. of gross domestic product, compared with only 40 per cent. in Germany and 24 per cent. in France. In this country, 80 per cent. of all mortgage debt is on a variable, as opposed to a fixed rate, of interest. According to that research, the comparable figures for Germany and France are only 5 per cent. and the rest of their mortgage debt is on a fixed rate.

Clearly, not only would a cut in interest rates within the euro have a different impact on the stability of our economy, but the sudden reduction that would occur if we joined in the early years, would have a dramatic impact on the stability of our economy. That is why, according to that research, there would have to be a significant increase in general taxation if we joined.

Has the Treasury done a study and will the Chief Secretary's forward projections under the code include an analysis of what will happen if the Government join the euro in the near future? Will he show us the honesty for which the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) asked, and tell us by how much taxation would have to increase?

I asked the Library to undertake further research, in the light of the current economic environment, 12 months after the Oxford research was published. According to the Library, we would now be contemplating a 3 per cent. change in short-term interest rates if we were to join the euro at its start. The analysis clearly shows that general taxation would have to be increased by the equivalent of 5p in the pound on income tax, or nearly £10 billion a year in total, for every single year of the projection. That extra taxation would be money taken out of the economy, not to be spent by the Government.

Will the Chief Secretary undertake to make his own analysis, within the terms of the stability code, and tell us what his corresponding figures are?

Mr. Cousins: The hon. Gentleman cited some interesting figures on the impact on mortgages of a hypothetical interest rate if we joined the euro. How much better off would the average mortgage payer be if we were to have those interest rates? Frankly, my appetite is being somewhat whetted by his argument.

Mr. St. Aubyn: Surely hon. Members are familiar with the low fixed-rate mortgages offered by many mortgage brokers. As the "Money Box" programme on Radio 4 has been telling its listeners, the catch comes in the long term, when one tries to renegotiate the terms of the mortgage and finds that there are high penalties for withdrawal. The problem with the cheap offer available from the euro is that the penalty for withdrawal is totally excessive and that, later, when the penalties have to be paid, there may indeed be no withdrawal and no exit.

That is the problem with the euro. At least, under the code, the Government are now duty bound to admit that any benefit to be gained from lower mortgage rates, even in the short term, would be offset by higher taxation. Many retired people on fixed incomes, part of which depends on deposit interest, will be hit by a double whammy. The retired would not only have lower interest on their deposit savings but would have to share the burden of higher taxation.

Does the Chief Secretary accept, in all honesty, that the code, in the range of assumptions on pages 8 to 10, requires him to show the effect on taxation if we were to join the euro in the early years? Has the Treasury made an analysis of the issue, and if not, why not? When will we get Treasury figures on the amount that tax will have to rise—immediately—if we join the euro, as a fiscal offset to the monetary easing that would take place?

11.44 pm

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): It is clear from this debate that the code is vapid and meaningless, full of airy phrases that can be interpreted to mean exactly what the Government want them to mean. However meaningful they may be, and there are considerable misgivings about that, the Government's two fiscal rules—the golden rule and the sustainable debt rule—are not even incorporated in the code.

The explanation of the code, published in March, said that

"to embrace the Government's two fiscal rules in the code would be unduly restrictive."

How strange then that the Government's consultative document on a proposed code, published six months earlier, said that

"the code needed to be restrictive so as to rule out the possibility of profligate fiscal behaviour."

Just six months later, the Government have changed their minds. No longer do they want to be restricted. No longer do they want to rule out profligate fiscal behaviour,

perhaps because in July this year they engaged in profligate fiscal behaviour with their public spending plans for the next three years.

What of the two fiscal rules? The golden rule involves splitting out current expenditure from capital expenditure and declaring that borrowing should not exceed capital expenditure. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) correctly said, the distinction between capital and revenue in this context is false. Willem Buiter, a member of the Government's Monetary Policy Committee said, "It has no merits" as a guide to optimal borrowing. The Ernst and Young Item Club in its summer report said that borrowing to fund capital expenditure has exactly the same effect as borrowing to fund current expenditure. They both increase the pressure of demand.

Not only is the golden rule meaningless but it is dependent on the definition of capital expenditure. That is open to abuse by Governments. They can change those definitions. There is nothing in the code about not manipulating the definition of capital expenditure. Indeed, the reason why Willem Buiter is so opposed to the golden rule is just such manipulation that occurs in other jurisdictions such as Germany. That is why my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Mr. Tyrie) was right to say that Germany had decided to abandon a golden rule. But this Government are perpetrating that manipulation here.

On page 124 of the November 1998 pre-Budget report published just a few weeks ago, paragraph B28 says:

"Some expenditure that was previously classified as current—chiefly dual-use military equipment and computer software—has been redefined as capital."

Here we come to the nub of the debate—the pretensions in the code to transparency, which is the first of the five principles of fiscal management.

How is it transparent to introduce a new and bogus concept of a surplus on current budget, which the Chancellor, the Prime Minister and the Chief Secretary again this evening have tried to shorten, in an outrageous attempt at obfuscation, to current surplus? They give the impression that the Government are running a budget surplus, whereas the reality is a budget deficit.

The current surplus is merely a sub-total of revenue less current expenditure before taking into account the so-called capital expenditure. Once the capital expenditure is included, as it should be, the result is a budget deficit. It is a wholly bogus concept—opaque, not transparent.

It gets worse. After the July comprehensive spending review, the Chancellor trumpeted his £30 billion current surplus. That figure was cobbled together by adding up the next three years of so-called surpluses on current budget of £7 billion, £10 billion and £13 billion, equalling £30 billion.

When, some five months later, the Chancellor was forced to recompute his numbers due to lower growth, by some miracle of creative accounting that would rate a place in the campaign of the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), that surplus rose—rose, not fell—to £33 billion. How was that calculated? It was calculated by taking the next five years rather than the three years of so-called surpluses on current budget of £1 billion, £3 billion, £8 billion, £10 billion and £11 billion. So it seems that the code does not apply to the statements that the Chancellor makes about the public finances. There is no requirement for him or his Ministers to present to the public the public finances in a clear and transparent way.

"The Code for Fiscal Stability" is a meaningless document. It has no force of law. It has no credibility. It is circumvented at every turn by the Government. I trust that the Chief Secretary will answer the question put by my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) about why there is no audit report of the assumptions in the November 1998 pre-Budget report.

11.50 pm

Mr. Byers: With the leave of the House, Mr. Deputy Speaker, I shall reply to the debate.

I begin by addressing the point made by the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), which the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton (Mr. Gibb) mentioned at the end of his speech, about the involvement of the National Audit Office and the reasons why it has not reported on the November 1998 pre-Budget report. The reason is simple. As the code says, the Government will

"invite the National Audit Office to audit changes in the key assumptions and conventions underpinning the fiscal projections".

There have been no such changes; therefore, there was no necessity to invite the NAO to carry out such an audit.

The right hon. Member for Wells spun an interesting web of conspiracy about why the September unemployment figures were used for example, but that is a good illustration of how we are following the normal conventions. The pre-Budget report came out in November and used the most recent unemployment figures available, which were the September figures. That is the convention that has been used for many years—indeed, it was used by the Government in which the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister—and we are simply continuing its use.

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: Will the Chief Secretary give way?

Mr. Byers: I shall give way, if there is time after I have answered some of the many points raised by right hon. and hon. Members in the debate. I understand that that is the purpose of a winding-up speech.

The right hon. Gentleman asked why we have a new format for public finances and was extremely critical on that point. The reason is simply that we are aligning our accounts with international and national definitions, and we make no apologies for doing so.

The hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Sir M. Spicer) started an interesting discussion about the distinction between current and capital expenditure. Given the way in which the Conservative Government slashed capital spending, I can understand why Conservative Members do not like a clear distinction to be made between the two forms of expenditure. The Labour Government are perfectly happy to have an analysis of spending divided into current and capital, because we believe that a real distinction can be made between the two. We are not hiding behind an artificial distinction, but being open and transparent about our spending in those areas.

[Mr. Byers]

The hon. Member for Guildford (Mr. St. Aubyn) raised the subject of the euro and the estimates and projections that have been built into forecasts in the light of our possible entry into the single currency. It is interesting that Conservative Members find it difficult to speak in any debate on the economy without bringing us back to the euro and what they see as its disadvantages.

Let me make the Government's position clear: we shall decide whether or not to join the euro based on whether that is in the national interest, and subject to a vote of the British people. That is not the policy that the Conservatives have adopted, of ruling out entry for 10 years because of political dogma and in an effort to paper over the cracks in the Conservative party. That is not our approach. We shall decide in the national interest whether or not the euro is appropriate for the United Kingdom.

The hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) spoke for the Liberal Democrats. I accept the importance of transparency and openness and the code seeks to achieve those aims. It is especially important that we move to resource accounting and budgeting, and we intend to do so. The hon. Gentleman was right to say that public service agreements and the targets that they include will be a means by which the Government are judged on whether the new money that we are committing to crucial areas, such as hospitals and schools, is valued and brings something extra in terms of improving standards and raising the quality of provision. The agreements will be made public and Parliament and the public will be able to judge how well we deliver those ambitious but challenging targets.

This evening's short debate has revealed that, if there is a black hole, as the right hon. Member for Wells says that there is, it is a black hole in Conservative thinking on the economy. I regret that this evening has witnessed yet another attempt to talk down our economy and a failure to recognise its underlying strengths. There are now 400,000 more people in jobs than there were on 1 May last year and inflation is at its target of 2.5 per cent. Under the Labour Government, there will be no going back to the days of boom and bust. When the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) was a Treasury Minister, interest rates were at 15 per cent., inflation was at 10 per cent. and more than 1 million jobs were lost. We shall not turn back the clocks to those days. The code for fiscal stability will assist the Government in steering a course of stability for our economy, and I commend it to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Code for Fiscal Stability, which was laid before this House on 3rd November, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker: With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

POLICE

That the draft Police Act 1997 (Notification of Authorisations etc.) Order 1998, which was laid before this House on 19th November, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

POLICE

That the draft Police Act 1997 (Authorisation of Action in Respect of Property) (Code of Practice) Order 1998, which was laid before this House on 19th November, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.

PRISONS

That the draft Parole Board (Transfer of Functions) Order 1998, which was laid before this House on 17th November, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—*[Jane Kennedy.]*

Question agreed to.

SCOTTISH GRAND COMMITTEE

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order 100 (Scottish Grand Committee (sittings)),

That the Scottish Grand Committee shall meet:—

(1) on Monday 18th January at half-past Ten o'clock at New Parliament House, Edinburgh, to consider a substantive motion for the adjournment of the Committee;

(2) on Monday 1st February at half-past Ten o'clock at New Parliament House, Edinburgh, to consider a substantive motion for the adjournment of the Committee;

(3) on Monday 8th March at half-past Ten o'clock at New Parliament House, Edinburgh, to consider a substantive motion for the adjournment of the Committee; and

(4) on Monday 22nd March at half-past Ten o'clock at New Parliament House, Edinburgh, to consider a substantive motion for the adjournment of the Committee—*[Jane Kennedy.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

School Closures (Borehamwood)

11.55 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): I wish to present a petition from my constituents concerning the future of education in Borehamwood. This petition has attracted more than 2,000 signatures. It states:

Petition of Save Our Schools Association

Declares that we are opposed to the closure of five schools in Borehamwood in the County of Hertfordshire as proposed by the Education Committee of Hertfordshire County Council.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to reject the proposed closure of these schools and demand that Hertfordshire County Council utilise the facilities and sound education that these five schools currently offer to the children of our town.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Speed Cameras

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

11.56 pm

Mr. David Kidney (Stafford): This has been an impressive week for the parliamentary deliberation of transport policy. I participated in Monday's debate on the Water Industry Bill but, sadly, we did not discuss the subject of water-borne transport. However, things looked up for transport on Tuesday when the main debate concerned the Road Traffic (NHS) Charges Bill and the Adjournment debate was about rail fares. The first debate today addressed the issue of road traffic reduction and the last debate is about the funding of speed cameras.

It has also been a good week for considering transport policy outside the Chamber. Yesterday, the Deputy Prime Minister published his consultation document on road use charges and workplace car park charges, and today, the Select Committee on the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs considered the Government's integrated transport policy. By coincidence, one of the witnesses who appeared before the Committee was a member of the Association of Chief Police Officers. The assistant chief constable of Cleveland, Mr. Richard Brunstrom, gave evidence about the funding of speed cameras.

I aim to deliver two basic messages to the House and to the Minister who will respond to the debate. First, speed cameras contribute significantly to road safety; and, secondly, we cannot achieve the optimal coverage of road routes without more secure funding for speed cameras. I hope that, when the Minister responds to the debate, he will confirm the accuracy of the report that appeared in today's edition of the *Evening Standard* that the Home Office is convinced of the benefits of additional funding for speed cameras on Britain's roads.

In 1987, a previous Government set a target to achieve a one third reduction in road casualties by 2000. The House now awaits the Government's announcement in this Parliament of new national targets for road casualty reduction beyond 2000. In addition, we understand that the Government will soon issue a road safety strategy. I ask the Minister to confirm when we might expect those new targets and the Government's new road safety strategy. It is difficult to imagine that those documents will not contain some substantial news about speed cameras and the part that they will play in driving down the number of road casualties in this country. Indeed, speed cameras have a proven record of reducing road casualties.

In Staffordshire, where my constituency lies, in the three years since cameras were installed on the first 12 sites, there has been a dramatic reduction in crashes causing personal injury. In the three years before the cameras were installed, there were 599 accidents, compared with 472 accidents after their installation. That represents a 21 per cent. reduction. Applying the law of averages to the figures for the period before the cameras were installed, the reduction represents a saving of 10 lives on the road, 29 serious injuries in road crashes and 88 slight injuries. The financial benefit to the community from the subsequent lack of need for attention at sites by the police and the fire service and for health treatment of people injured in accidents is estimated to total £8 million.

It is significant that the severity of the crashes has decreased. Incidents of fatal and serious injury have fallen by 49 per cent. from 79 to 40. That reflects the slower speed of traffic at those sites.

What is the national picture? Where better to look for news on the success of speed cameras than in a report commissioned by the Home Office? In 1995, the Home Office commissioned a cost-benefit analysis of speed cameras and traffic lights from Andrew Hook, Jim Knox and David Portas. The report, which was issued in 1996, revealed that, in areas where speed cameras were used, accidents fell by 28 per cent. and speeds were reduced by an average of 4.2 mph. The fixed cost for installing cameras was £12,500 each and the average recurring expenditure for each camera was £8,500 per year.

The report went on to describe the wider benefits of the cameras, such as the release of police officers from speed enforcement duties for other useful duties and the detection not only of speeding offences but other crimes, including serious crimes. There is also anecdotal evidence that people in the local communities along the routes where the cameras are installed feel safer.

In addition to those benefits, ACPO—which has given evidence today to the Select Committee—estimates that there is a financial saving to the community of £8 billion a year from the wider use of speed cameras. ACPO argues that that translates into substantial savings in NHS treatment, which results in lower waiting lists. That is truly an example of the joined-up thinking in which the Government are interested.

On funding, the conclusion of the cost-benefit analysis commissioned by the Home Office said:

> "The cost benefit analysis demonstrated that the use of . . . speed cameras generated substantial net benefits. It was also shown that the 'pay back' period for this technology was fairly short and that implementation has led to a reduction in the number of road traffic accidents at camera sites."

In Staffordshire, a good example of that is the good partnership working arrangements between the county council's highway authority and Staffordshire police, who are the enforcing agency. Both contribute to the costs of the speed cameras. That means that council tax payers are paying for the speed cameras. The budgets of the council and the police authority are under pressure. That is not unique to Staffordshire; it is typical of what is happening around the country. Staffordshire has identified further sites that would benefit from the installation of speed cameras by potentially reducing road casualties, but the limited funds restrain its ability to install the cameras to make the savings in road casualties. In the meantime, all the fines collected from speeding motorists go directly to the Treasury; none of the money goes towards the cost of installing and maintaining the speed cameras themselves.

How much is the income from fines? About 250,000 people face speeding fines each year, and a fixed penalty is £40. If a quarter of a million people pay £40, the fine income is £10 million. However, some people go to court because their speeding is so serious that a fixed penalty is not appropriate. The average court fine is a little over £100, so each year the income from fines must be well above £10 million. The *Evening Standard* report gives a figure of £17 million.

A little-noticed fact about the speeders who go to court and face a fine is that the magistrates add to the fine an award of costs that the motorists must also pay. Those

[Mr. David Kidney]

costs are for the administration of bringing the case before the magistrates court, so there is nothing new in asking those who offend to pay administration costs in addition to the penalty. Might it not be a neat solution, as some police and councils argue, if the speeder were charged an administration fee in addition to the fine? I strongly agree with that approach.

I understand that the Government have been reviewing the funding of speed cameras for some time. Has the Minister any news of when an announcement might be expected? Some argue that the administration charge that I mentioned could be said to be an extra levy or another tax on motorists. That was certainly the approach taken in an article in *The Sunday Telegraph* last week. My response to that—perhaps the Minister will agree—is that that would certainly not be the case if best practice were strictly enforced.

I take best practice to mean that the amount of the administration fee is transparently all that is required to cover the administration costs but, more important, that the sites selected for the placing of speed cameras are selected by reference to criteria that relate exclusively to road casualty reduction and also that, when the radars are set for the cameras, they are set within strictly defined parameters. The cost-benefit analysis to which I have referred also mentions that point.

The report's conclusion states:

"The study also generated a number of good practice guidelines which are presented in the main report. These suggest that the level of benefit derived from the use of cameras was linked to the manner in which they are deployed."

In other words, following best practice is the right thing to do, in terms not only of effectiveness in use but of not claiming extra money from people, over and above the penalty.

In Staffordshire, best practice is underwritten by the fact that the police and the council have signed a service level agreement, which includes criteria such as how the sites for the road cameras are selected. In this way, the public are reassured that the only priority is road safety.

I recently visited the Staffordshire traffic police headquarters, which is in my constituency. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to the dedication of the workers—police officers and civilians—who detect and enforce the payment of fines by those who exceed speed limits. They, like others across the country, are working to make our roads safer, but will the Minister outline the Government's policy to make sure that they all have the right tools to do their job effectively?

12.9 am

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): The House owes my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Mr. Kidney) a debt of gratitude for bringing this matter before it. He has shown unusual prescience—not that he does not normally show prescience—in that, in view of several announcements over the past 24 hours by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, an Adjournment debate has seldom been as well timed.

The funding of speed cameras is, of course, an important issue. We are all familiar with the camera logo at the road side. It warns us to slow down. Those with any sense do so, and those without risk a fine. It would be all too easy to forget that the objective of cameras is not to raise revenue through the levying of fines but to reduce injuries and to save lives. I very much welcome the way in which my hon. Friend highlighted at the outset of his speech the importance of the road safety benefits of cameras. He was quite right to set that as a context in which this important debate should be conducted. We are fully committed to ensuring as a Government that we work across Departments—the Home Office, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Treasury—to improve road safety. We recognise that the use of cameras is one important means of so doing.

The history of the matter is well known. It goes back to the North report in 1988, which recommended that the law should be changed to facilitate the use of cameras for enforcing road traffic law, and the Road Traffic Act 1991, which implemented that report, starting the growth in the use of cameras. They have grown like Topsy ever since. The Act provided enhanced powers for the police to trace the drivers of cars and introduced a new arrangement for improving the accuracy and reliability of cameras, linked with the introduction of a fixed-penalty system, which allows the police to serve fixed penalties on offenders by post. That was the platform on which the growth has occurred.

The good news is that the number of speeding offences detected by cameras has risen from a little more than 32,000 in 1993 to more than 262,000 in 1996—34 per cent. of speeding offences dealt with in that year, the last year for which we in the Home Office have official figures. We expect the figure for 1997 to be significantly higher.

Despite such growth, the issue of funding has always been challenging. Indeed, it was the very first issue raised with me during my recent attendance at the annual conference of the Association of Police Authorities in Blackpool. I am delighted that we are not only debating it, but doing so in the context of a change in our practice.

It was originally envisaged that the police would purchase the cameras and pay their running costs. However, the Home Office circular issued with the 1991 Act envisaged the possibility that highway authorities could, by agreement, share the cost with the police. That is precisely what has happened. Most cameras have been purchased by local highway authorities, and the police pay for the processing of film and administrative costs. That partnership is to be commended. It fits in well with the highway authorities' responsibility for the promotion of road safety.

As my hon. Friend has pointed out, however, as the number of cameras and administrative costs have grown, so the financial burden on local authorities and the police service has increased—hence their understandable concern. In light of that, it is not surprising that much of the correspondence that my fellow Ministers and I receive on the subject, as Ministers, suggests that some of the fine income from cameras should be re-invested in its source, to promote road safety. That hypothecation has its attractions. There are some difficulties and challenges too, and in recent months we have been reflecting on those.

We understand the attraction of the scheme. It is a simple way to fund cameras, and there is a certain sense of justice in the notion that offenders should pay for the

running of the cameras that detect their offending. It could be suggested that, without offenders, there would be no need for cameras.

However, in government we must take a broader view as to how revenue is raised and the priorities for spending it. The fact that speed cameras can generate fine income for the Treasury does not automatically mean that the money should be re-invested in cameras. Some Government priorities generate no income, and funding must come from somewhere. It is not just a question of following the apparently easy and obvious course. It is necessary to recognise the importance of ensuring good value for money.

Any decision whether to change camera funding arrangements depends on a proper, detailed evaluation of the case. We have been engaged in such an evaluation. The emerging findings are reflected in the announced statements and intentions of my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, but we must remember that we are talking about providing additional public funds for cameras over and above that which the police service and highway authorities have already earmarked. That additionality is very important, and it is vital that we get an objective judgment as to the costs and benefits.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford referred to some of the analysis that we have commissioned on traffic lights and speed cameras, and has cited some results that were published in 1996. When considering the fall in accidents at speed camera sites—some 28 per cent., as my hon. Friend said—the £5.3 million investment made to install cameras, the fivefold return on that amount after one year and the return of more than 25 times that amount after five years, we must recognise that it is not all cash, and that opportunity costs are included. Nevertheless, the figures are impressive, and they show the benefits. They also show some spin-off advantages. Many forces found that the use of cameras released officers from other duties. That is enormously important. Significantly, cameras have produced some useful results in terms of the detection of other crime, not least in the identification of stolen vehicles.

We have seen, objectively, the costs and benefits that can arise from running speed cameras when they are properly deployed and used. The study also identified for the first time the costs that running cameras places on the court system. My hon. Friend, as a solicitor, will be aware of those costs. There are costs of administration and of court time—and from time to time, not least, there are costs on the Crown Prosecution Service.

The funding of speed cameras is of concern not only to the police and local highway authorities; a chain of processes needs to be taken into account. We must ensure that we do not distort the process by using any form of hypothecation that would have that effect. A concern exists that, if a person's income depends directly on the number of motorists that they prosecute, that person will feel pressure to take action against the marginal case.

That would obviously not be right. I am bound to say that, in this country, that risk is a pretty theoretical one, but it is there. There are a number of important interests that we need to balance, not least continued public support for the notion that speed cameras are in place, first and foremost, to reduce casualties on our roads. My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford and other right hon. and hon. Members will be aware of the experience in Canada. When it became clear to the public that cameras were being used not primarily for road safety purposes but to generate revenue, public opinion turned against the cameras to the detriment of road safety. That was because they became a political issue. As a result of that, speed cameras were driven off the roads in the aftermath of the electoral process. I do not believe that that would happen in this country but we need to take into account the importance of public support.

We must always remember as well that operational matters are for the chief officer. It is the chief officer—not Ministers or local government officers—who must determine precisely how the cameras are deployed for maximum effect in his area. Deployment will vary properly from force to force. Indeed, some chief officers have made it clear that their interest in the proposals stem from the fact that they do not have the revenues that they would like to place the cameras where they would like. Sometimes conflicting priorities need to be set. Local choices are sometimes difficult.

The Government also have to make choices. There are never enough resources to pursue all our aims to perfection, but we are convinced that the partnership approach is the one that holds out the best solution. We are determined to build on that as we take forward this issue and as we explore the possibilities that are now being opened up by the Treasury's position and the announcement made by my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister.

The criteria that need to be met were summarised in "The Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998" of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer. He made the position clear then and my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary made the point that, in determining what would be a flexible and effective framework within which the controls on the spending of public money operate, there must be strict criteria. He believes that the time is now right to consider how such criteria would work in this area. Indeed, my right hon. Friend makes the point that it is important to ensure that, in each instance, the money raised is appropriate, that it is spent where it is most needed and that it will not distort the operational priorities of the organisations concerned.

The point was made in section 3.4 of "The Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report 1998" that Departments will be able to keep some levies and similar taxes, netting them off the departmental expenditure limit where that would further the Government's economic objectives, improve efficiency and not prejudice spending plans and priorities. It is important that there should be safeguards. Safeguards would ensure that some income from fines might also be netted off the departmental expenditure limit where that would assist in fighting crime. We are anxious to ensure that those criteria are developed along the lines announced by the Treasury today. They represent a significant departure from previous policy and I am sure that hon. Members on both sides of the House, not least my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford, who raised these matters at such a timely stage, will find the development most encouraging.

There is still some way to go. We still need to ensure that we can meet and readily identify the costs of enforcement and apportion them without undue bureaucracy. We still need to ensure that we get the inter-departmental and inter-agency agreement in place.

[Mr. Paul Boateng]

We still need also to identify the savings that we can achieve through change and ensure that adequate efficiency arrangements are in place to deliver those changes in a way that does not impose additional costs. Those costs, where they exist, will need to be properly controlled, and we need to keep efficiency under regular review.

We are working with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Lord Chancellor's Department on carrying the issue forward. We will make proposals to the Treasury in due course, and the Chief Secretary has indicated his willingness to agree such proposals if they meet his criteria. I have no doubt that, in due course, in the spirit of partnership and co-operation that I have outlined, we will be able to meet the objectives which my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford has so ably shown he shares and which are so much in the interests of his constituents and of the people of our country in general.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-five minutes past Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Thursday 10 December 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Hypothecated Taxation

1. **Mr. Norman Baker** (Lewes): If he will make a statement on his policy in respect of hypothecated taxation. [61745]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ms Patricia Hewitt): In general, the Government determine their expenditure according to need rather than the source of the revenue, but we will continue to look at each case on its merits.

Mr. Baker: Does the Minister agree that the recent Marshall report on energy taxation represents a good example of what an hypothecated tax might provide? Will she then explain why the Chancellor's advisers have been briefing that that has been kicked into the long grass—into the very long grass? Will she give an undertaking that the Marshall proposals will be implemented in this Parliament, or is the Treasury still stuck in the 1950s?

Ms Hewitt: The Marshall report is extremely welcome. It has moved forward significantly the debate on a possible tax on business use of energy. We are now looking in detail at the complex technical issues that the Marshall report raises. He recommended further work on the subject. We are continuing to carry that out and to consult on the matter.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Has the Minister heard of the Tobin tax, an internationally co-ordinated tax directed against currency speculators? That money could then be used for third-world debt and for international development. As Labour is good at reviews, might it not be a good idea to have a look at that idea and to feed it into the international community?

Ms Hewitt: I am sure that my hon. Friend will be aware of and welcome the work that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer has done in pursuing proposals for reform of the global financial architecture. No doubt the Tobin tax proposals will be debated within that context.

Mr. Shaun Woodward (Witney): Given the statement by the Chancellor in the pre-Budget statement that there would be a cut in vehicle excise duty for small cars, and the thinking of the Chancellor and the Treasury about hypothecated taxes, is it the Minister's view that any surplus revenue brought about by changes to vehicle excise duty should form an hypothecated tax to be used for the environment?

Ms Hewitt: As I have already said, it remains our view that, in general, expenditure should be determined according to need rather than the source of the revenue. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will be aware of the problems that can arise when revenue is inappropriately hypothecated to particular expenditure goals. As I said, we will continue to look at each case on its merits.

Mr. Ian Davidson (Glasgow, Pollok): Does the Minister accept that, although there is a general reluctance among the public to pay increased taxes when they believe that the money may go simply into a bottomless pit of Government expenditure, there would be a willingness to pay hypothecated taxation because people would then be clear that the money was being spent on education and health. Perhaps it would give some political parties, not least my own, the courage to go to people and say that, if they want improved services, they have to pay for them.

Ms Hewitt: I am sure that my hon. Friend and, indeed, all hon. Members will welcome the additional £40 billion that the Government have committed to schools and to hospitals. *[Interruption.]* I am sorry that the official Opposition have apparently decided to oppose that additional expenditure. As I said, we will continue to look at each case on its merits, but I draw my hon. Friend's attention to the announcement by the Deputy Prime Minister earlier this week that, where a local authority decides to carry out a pilot programme of congestion charging on the roads, it will be allowed to put up to 100 per cent. of that revenue into worthwhile transport-related projects.

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): Is it not the case that, originally, the road fund taxation was supposed to be an hypothecated tax to build roads? If my memory serves me well, income tax in the 1890s was set up to build battleships. Does the fate of those two taxes not show the folly of any hypothecated tax? Will the Minister stick firmly to principles that she has enunciated to the House?

Ms Hewitt: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that interesting excursion into the history of taxes. The Inland Revenue has recently opened an exhibition on the history of income tax. I think that income tax was originally introduced to pay for the Napoleonic wars, but the point that the hon. Gentleman makes is extremely valid. In general, expenditure should be decided according to need rather than the source of the revenue. Any proposals for exceptions to that should be considered as we consider them: on their merits.

Economic Growth

2. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What plans he has to review the methodology for calculating national economic growth rates. [61746]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Byers): The Office for National Statistics has recently reviewed its methods for estimating national economic growth. Its work is important, as it informs the discussions of the Monetary Policy Committee of the Bank of England. The Government welcome today's decision by the Bank to cut interest rates. As the Bank said, it follows a weakening in global economic activity. The cut was made possible only because the Government are steering a course of economic stability in an uncertain and unstable world.

Mr. Chapman: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. Does he agree that our economic growth forecasts are based on sound methodology, but are also cautious and prudent? Does he also agree that Labour Members are in the business of realism and not pessimism? Does he further agree that that contrasts sharply with Conservative Members, who are constantly taking the pessimistic view and talking down the economy and the United Kingdom?

Mr. Byers: It is a matter of great regret that Conservative Members fail to recognise the underlying strengths of our economy. The fact is that 400,000 more people are in work now than when we took office, on 1 May 1997. In the shadow Chancellor's own constituency, there has been a 29 per cent. reduction in the number of those who are out of work. I should hope that he would be able to knowledge that, and to recognise the United Kingdom's underlying economic strengths. The Government are not prepared to go back to the days when he was a Treasury Minister—the days of boom and bust, interest rates at 15 per cent., inflation at 10 per cent., and over 1 million jobs lost. That was the reality. We shall not go back to those days. We are steering a course of stability in an uncertain world.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip-Northwood): May I suggest a methodology that may be more readily understood by the general public—counting the tally of P45s issued? Yesterday, 200 were issued at Alsthom; today, 1,200 were issued at Doulton; and probably a lot more will be issued tomorrow and the day after. Is not the economy heading for great stability against the rocks?

Mr. Byers: That was a very good example of the way in which Conservative Members have a very partial approach to events in the economy. The reality is—as always—that, at particular times, some areas face particular difficulties, whereas other areas create employment opportunities. However, to consider the economy in the round, the figures and the facts show—I know that the hon. Gentleman does not like facts to get in the way of his own prejudice—that 400,000 more people are in work now than when the previous Government were ejected from office. That is the reality, and those are the facts. It is about time that Conservative Members recognised them.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): Will the Minister tell the House how much weight the Government put on surveys of business confidence when they forecast economic growth? Will the Minister confirm that, after 18 months of Labour in power, business confidence is now at an 18-year low? Will he tell us whether he thinks that the 0.5 per cent. cut in interest rates will be enough to lift the business gloom?

Mr. Byers: The Government welcome the interest rate cut announced today by the Bank of England, which will be good news for businesses, consumers and home owners. We believe that the Bank has been able to take that decision only because of the tough measures that we have introduced to ensure that inflation is at the 2.5 per cent. target, and to cut last year's national deficit by £20 billion. Interestingly, a majority of people express confidence when asked specifically about their own business, whereas they express pessimism about the economy as a whole. It is an example of people listening to scaremongers, such as Conservative Members, who talk down our economy.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): Talking of realism, as opposed to the Government's astonishing complacency, has the right hon. Gentleman seen today's MORI poll of senior executives, showing not only that only 1 per cent. expect the economy to improve in the next year—whereas a staggering 89 per cent. expect it to worsen—but that a majority of them take a more pessimistic view of their own business prospects? Are all those people talking down the economy? When will Ministers stop talking down British business by attacking it? When will they abandon their complacency and reverse the burdens that they are piling on which threaten to make Britain's downturn the first and the worst in the western world, with 2,000 more job losses announced just this morning?

Mr. Byers: The right hon. Gentleman talks about talking business down and placing burdens on business, but we are a Government who have cut corporation tax, from April 1999, to 30 per cent. From next April, we are cutting corporation tax for small businesses to 20 per cent. Those burdens were imposed on business by the Conservative Government. They are being lifted by this Government. That is why we have underlying strength in the economy, and can steer a course of stability. We shall continue to do that, not adopting the right hon. Gentleman's short-term approach, but planning in the long term for continued economic prosperity and stability.

Windfall Tax

3. **Mr. Mike Gapes** (Ilford, South): If he will make a statement on the mechanisms for the allocation of the proceeds of the windfall tax. [61747]

10. **Ms Rosie Winterton** (Doncaster, Central): If he will make a statement on the use made of the proceeds of the windfall tax. [61754]

17. **Dr. Stephen Ladyman** (South Thanet): What further plans he has for the proceeds of the windfall tax on the privatised utilities. [61763]

The Paymaster General (Mr. Geoffrey Robinson): The House will be pleased to know that the second instalment of the windfall tax has been paid in full, raising £5.2 billion. Some £2.6 billion of that has been allocated

to the welfare-to-work programme for 18 to 24-year-olds and £1.3 billion has been allocated to the new deal for schools.

Mr. Gapes: I am grateful for that reply. Will my hon. Friend confirm that, if the whingeing Liberals and the neanderthal Conservatives had had their way, there would have been no windfall tax, and therefore no new deal? Will he further confirm that, by April next year, 300,000 people will have benefited from the new deal, including 30,000 18 to 24-year-olds, who will be in work as a result? May I draw to his attention the regional discrepancies in take-up of the new deal? Will he try to remedy the problem of some people in London staying for a considerable period in the gateway?

Mr. Robinson: I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. The length of time in the gateway is one aspect that needs particular attention. The Employment Service is well aware of that. He is right to point out that the Conservatives oppose the windfall tax, the new deal for schools and the welfare-to-work programme. Of course, that is not true of all Conservatives. They might look at the wise words of the hon. Member for South-West Bedfordshire (Sir D. Madel), who made it clear on 4 December that he welcomed the new deal in his constituency, and referred to the great amount of good that it was doing for young people there.

Ms Winterton: Is my hon. Friend aware that, in areas such as South Yorkshire, the public utilities used to have a good track record on training, exceeding their requirements? Are the privatised utilities participating in the new deal by providing training opportunities? If not, what action will the Treasury take to encourage them to participate?

Mr. Robinson: In fairness, the utilities have played a full part in making the new deal possible. Beyond that, many of them have signed up and are participating in it, and providing training. Yorkshire Water has signed up and Yorkshire Electricity is already in meaningful discussions with the Employment Service. Instead of sniping from the sidelines, the Conservatives should make it clear why they are against our measures to provide jobs and training for youngsters and to make employment work.

Dr. Ladyman: Does my hon. Friend agree with a constituent who wrote to me this week, who certainly regards the windfall tax spending on the new deal as money well spent? It is entirely thanks to the new deal that the man, who is in his 40s, is back in full-time paid employment for the first time since 1994. Will my right hon. Friend assure me that we shall continue to extend the new deal, and that the remaining proceeds from the windfall tax will be used to improve its quality further, in particular to extend the gateway, which is key to the success of the new deal?

Mr. Robinson: My hon. Friend is correct. We have 28 pilot projects under way for the long-term unemployed. He referred to one constituent. He will welcome the news that the pilots are showing good signs of success throughout the country. We intend to build on them.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): As the hon. Gentleman has apparently remained a Treasury Minister in the 12 months since I ceased to shadow him, despite appearances to the contrary, will he explain, as he was unable to do 12 months ago, how it has been possible to raise £5.6 billion from British industry without any apparent impact on employment in the industries concerned or on their investment programmes—or has he merely joined the Magic Circle?

Mr. Robinson: To start with, the hon. Gentleman has got the figure wrong—it is £5.2 billion. All the regulators for the industries signed up to it. Instead of carping around irrelevant points, why do not Opposition Members concentrate on what is happening in their constituencies, and work with the Employment Service agencies to make the deal a success? As they have opposed the scheme so vehemently throughout, the country will expose their hypocrisy on it.

Mr. Nick St. Aubyn (Guildford): One of the objections to the new deal is that it does not provide enough money to help the older unemployed—those in their 30s, 40s, 50s and perhaps even early 60s. Will more money be made available for them, including unexpectedly retired former Ministers?

Mr. Robinson: The Opposition really have to make up their mind. Either they are in favour of the new deal and the £500 million that we have made available for the long-term unemployed, to whom I think the hon. Gentleman was referring, or they are not. If they are not, they should make it clear, but if they are, I should tell him that we are looking at the 28 pilots. If we can build on them, and if they prove successful—and the signs are that they are—we shall extend the scheme.

Mr. Malcolm Bruce (Gordon): Does the Paymaster General acknowledge that the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) has a significant point? The consumers who paid for the excess profits that have been taxed would have benefited had those profits been returned to them in lower prices or further investment. As he is answering this question, can he confirm that he is still in charge of the windfall tax programme and sorting out the problem faced by the poor pensioners who have suffered from the dividend changes that he introduced? He pledged to do something about it. Does he plan to do so, or has he been stripped of that responsibility?

Mr. Robinson: It is interesting that, typically, the Liberals voted against the windfall tax, yet continue to pretend that they are in favour of it, willing the end but not the means. That inconsistency is a hallmark of the Liberal party. For our part, we have raised £5.2 billion. We are putting it to good use, and it is recognised throughout the country that the programmes on which we have embarked are proving successful.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): My hon. Friend will recall that the windfall tax is actually a Tory tax. It was imposed on the banks in the 1980s. Following the news that the NatWest bank made £1 billion profit in its first six months—through ripping off some of its customers, such as The Tanning Shop franchisees—I wonder whether the banks should now be subject to a windfall tax.

Mr. Robinson: My hon. Friend will understand if I do not follow him down that route of speculation. However,

he is quite right to say that the Tories introduced the windfall tax when they taxed the profits made by the banks due to high interest rates. Of course they are embarrassed by our success in these matters, as they presided over much higher rates of unemployment, for example. When the right hon. Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory) was a Treasury Minister, we had interest rates above 10 per cent. for four years. That was his record. We are determined not to repeat those mistakes. Improving the basis of our training skills throughout the economy is a fundamental part of that.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): I am sure that the hon. Gentleman now knows that he is in charge of looking after taxpayers' money rather than taking it away from them. In the first year of the Labour Government, long-term unemployment was decreasing rapidly and when the new deal was first introduced long-term unemployment actually went up. The latest figures show that the long-term unemployed who disappeared from the register are not actually in jobs under the new deal, but are participating in the make-work schemes being provided under the new deal. In six months' time those people will be back on the register, and the Paymaster General will have wasted taxpayers' money again.

Mr. Robinson: In the months since we started the new deal for the young unemployed—the 18 to 24-year-olds—unemployment in that category has fallen by 27 per cent. We have only just got the 28 pilots for the long-term unemployed under way, but if they prove successful we shall see similar improvements in that group. Instead of carping and criticising, why do not the Opposition welcome the measures, and work with us to make them succeed?

Euro

4. **Mr. Hugh Bayley** (City of York): What initiatives the Treasury is taking to help United Kingdom businesses prepare for the possibility that the United Kingdom joins the euro. [61748]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ms Patricia Hewitt): The Government will be publishing an outline national changeover plan early next year as a first step in setting out the practical steps that would need to be followed if the United Kingdom decided to join the single currency.

Mr. Bayley: Does my hon. Friend recall that Conservative European policy more than doubled VAT from 8 to 17.5 per cent., extended the scope of VAT to include gas and electricity, and agreed to the abolition of duty-free, all in the name of European Union tax harmonisation? Does she agree that it is important that UK businesses prepare to use the euro, regardless of whether we join, and that the introduction of the euro has no bearing whatever on our resisting further EU tax harmonisation?

Ms Hewitt: I entirely agree with all my hon. Friend's points. I am sure that he will agree with me when I say how extraordinary it is that the Conservative party is no longer waiting and seeing, but has decided to be the anti-European party—it has turned its back on Europe and on the British national interest.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): As part of the process of preparing business for the possibility of our entering European monetary union, will someone explain that our entry would mean massive new taxation, partly to compensate poor countries for the misery that they will suffer as a result of joining the euro?

Ms Hewitt: We hear again the authentic voice of the Conservative party—it is opposed to Europe and to Britain's continuing membership of the European Union. As more than half our trade is with the rest of the European Union, it is essential for British business that we assist it to prepare for the introduction of the euro next year.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Does my hon. Friend share my excitement about the coverage of European economic affairs in *The Sunday Times*, *The Times* and *The Sun*? Has she seen the marvellous articles that they have published showing how clothes, cars, computers and food are much cheaper in Europe than in Britain after 20 years of Tory rule? As the rate of VAT in Germany is 16 per cent., does she agree that British consumers would welcome the harmonisation of our VAT down to red Oskar levels?

Ms Hewitt: I am not sure that I share my hon. Friend's excitement, but he makes an extremely important point about the extent to which British consumers in many product markets are paying higher prices than consumers do in other parts of the European Union and, indeed, in the United States of America. In striking contrast to the previous Government, this Government are determined to strengthen our competition laws in the interests of the British consumer. As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary and my hon. Friend the Financial Secretary set out last night, we have a clear position on taxation in the European Union, unlike the Conservative party, which has ceased defending the British national interest in the EU.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): Will the hon. Lady assure the House that no public money, either from the European Union budget or from the Treasury, will be used to fund propaganda for the euro? In particular, will she confirm that the new parliamentary Liaison Committee, which is chaired by a Labour Back Bencher, will be used only to help businesses to prepare for a new foreign currency on 1 January and not to soften them up and persuade them that the United Kingdom should join the euro?

Ms Hewitt: If the right hon. Gentleman is referring to our recent campaign to raise the awareness of small and medium businesses about the introduction of the euro, I hope that that is something that he will support. As for the cross-party Committee to which he refers, he will be aware that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor, in his letters of 10 November, said that the group will be designed

"to act as a channel for the exchange of information and to develop cross-party awareness of the continuing preparations for the Euro."

I hope that, despite the anti-European stance of his party, he will agree that it is in the interests of British business and British citizens to be aware of the continuing preparations for the euro.

Ms Debra Shipley (Stourbridge): Will my hon. Friend join me in welcoming the initiatives taken by my colleagues

in the Dudley metropolitan borough—which includes my constituency—regarding the introduction of European measures. Will she also welcome the good work being done by the Dudley training and enterprise council and Dudley business link in helping businesses on all European issues? Will she allay the fears that any small businesses in my constituency may have, and state that we will support them?

Ms Hewitt: I am happy to welcome the work of Dudley council in helping local businesses to prepare for the introduction of the euro. It is extremely important that small and medium businesses which are trading with suppliers and buyers within the euro-zone are aware of the implications for them of the introduction of the euro on 1 January. I congratulate the council on the work that it is doing in assisting local businesses, and small businesses in her constituency and across the country can rely upon the Treasury to assist them in practical terms in taking advantage of the opportunities that the introduction of the euro will provide.

Stenbell Ltd.

5. **Mr. Andrew Robathan** (Blaby): How much tax has been paid by Stenbell Ltd. in the last five years. [61749]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Byers): As has been the case under successive Governments, the law on taxpayer confidentiality prevents the Inland Revenue from disclosing any information relating to the tax affairs of any particular taxpayer.

Mr. Robathan: This is a matter of real public interest and, I suggest, of grave concern to hon. Members on both sides of the House. Is it not the case that the tax paid by Stenbell, together with the £500,000 of tax not paid by AGB, the connection with Hollis Industries, the implication of Robert Maxwell in both those companies and the claims of the Maxwell pensioners are part of a tangled web that must interest the Treasury—yet at the centre of the web is a Treasury Minister? Notwithstanding the Paymaster General's friends in high places and his holiday guests in Tuscany, does not the Minister consider that a Minister in the Paymaster General's position should have resigned long ago?

Mr. Byers: The hon. Gentleman makes allegations. The Paymaster General is a highly effective Minister, and I look forward to working with him for many months to come. The question that Conservative Members need to answer is why, in the Tory party's recently published accounts, there is a secret donation of £1 million which, we are told, was donated by a party connected to Michael Ashcroft, the Tory party treasurer. We know that Mr. Ashcroft has been a tax exile for a number of years, preferring to pay his tax in Belize rather than Britain. That is the question that the Conservatives must answer.

The Leader of the Opposition has said that he wants to lead a party with no secret donations. Why the secrecy in this case? Why has there been no disclosure? The time has come for the Conservative party to answer those questions.

Madam Speaker: Order. That does not relate to the question. I will take only questions which relate directly to the main question.

Mr. Francis Maude (Horsham): The Paymaster General—who is, I understand, the owner of Stenbell Ltd.—has been stripped of responsibility for taxation because of his own affection for placing his tax affairs offshore; he cannot deal with corporate matters because he is being investigated by the DTI under the Companies Acts; and he almost never appears in the House of Commons—except today, for his swansong.

He has been shown to have systematically concealed his business links with Robert Maxwell. Why do not the Government abandon—

Madam Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is fully aware that he should have a substantive motion on the Order Paper before he criticises a Member of this House. If he will restrict his supplementary question to what is on the Order Paper, I will hear it. Otherwise, I must ask him to resume his seat until he has a proper motion on the Order Paper.

Mr. Maude: The Paymaster General is the subject of this question. Why do not the Government abandon the search for a face-saving exit for the Paymaster General, and simply sack him?

Mr. Byers: The shadow Chancellor can put two questions to the Treasury today, and it is interesting that he has chosen to use one of them for a deliberate personal attack on a Treasury Minister. I am sure that there are many other issues that members of the public would have thought he might raise. His misguided priorities all too often reveal the nature of the Conservative party. I think that he will come to regret the way in which he put his question. I am pleased to be working with my hon. Friend the Paymaster General, who is an effective Minister, and I am sure that I will continue to work with him for many months to come.

EU Withholding Tax

6. **Mr. John Greenway** (Ryedale): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of the proposed EU withholding tax. [61750]

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Dawn Primarolo): We have carefully examined the draft directive on taxation of savings, and consulted the City about its possible impact on the markets. My right hon. Friend the Chancellor has made it clear that, in its present form, the directive is unacceptable.

Mr. Greenway: I am grateful to the Financial Secretary for confirming what she said last night—that the EU withholding tax is unacceptable in its present form. In what form would a withholding tax be acceptable? Does she agree that any international action to protect UK interests, unless it is mounted on a global scale, will automatically mean the transfer of business and jobs not only from London but from all member states to America, Japan and Switzerland?

Dawn Primarolo: The Government have always made it clear that we are determined to protect the competitiveness of the European financial sector, and in particular the City of London. We favour—as, I hope, did the previous Government—effective international action against tax evasion. The solution that we prefer is the exchange of information, and the previous Government

were so keen on that that in 1988 they voted for a directive enshrining it. It was called the directive on capital movements.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): My hon. Friend will agree that the xenophobic tone of much media comment on European taxation matters is to be deplored. Does she also agree that, if a country is to proceed with economic and monetary union and complete monetary integration, a degree of fiscal integration follows, as night follows day? It is misleading the public to pretend that one can have monetary convergence with no effect on fiscal policy.

Dawn Primarolo: I am sorry that my hon. Friend missed the debate last night. I reiterate what I said then: monetary union does not equal harmonisation. It does not in the United States, and it will not in Europe. The Government have made it clear that harmonisation is not on the agenda for the foreseeable future.

Mr. David Heathcoat-Amory (Wells): Is the Financial Secretary aware that it is strongly believed in the financial services industry that the Government are preparing a sell-out on the withholding tax? Does she understand that, even if we get rid of the compulsory 20 per cent. savings tax, the alternative is just as bad? The compulsory provision of information to overseas tax authorities would have the same effect, driving business right out of the European Union.

Instead of giving vague assurances about protecting the national interest, as defined by the Government, will the Financial Secretary for a change announce that she will simply veto this damaging directive, which will not only destroy an important and successful British industry but put at risk the thousands of jobs that depend on it?

Dawn Primarolo: The right hon. Gentleman may be having some difficulty with his hearing. I repeat that the exchange of information, which is the Government's preferred way to deal with that issue, is the way that we are proceeding in our negotiations. I repeat also that his Government agreed to a directive in 1988 that enshrined exchange of information. It was called the directive on capital movements. I know that the Tories like to forget quickly what they did in government, but the right hon. Gentleman's forecast did not happen then and will not happen in the future. This Government will defend the national interest and take decisions on the directive based on the national interest.

Stockbrokers (Regulation)

7. **Mr. David Chaytor** (Bury, North): What plans he has to improve the system of regulation of stockbrokers. [61751]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Byers): Soon after coming to office last May, the Government announced their plans to modernise the system of regulation for the financial services industry generally. A single body, the Financial Services Authority, has been established, which will be given statutory powers in the financial services and markets Bill which we will bring forward later in this Session.

Mr. Chaytor: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply. One of my constituents, a characteristic small investor, is in dispute with a reputable firm of stockbrokers—I shall resist the temptation to name the firm—to the tune of some £200,000. That sum is in dispute because of incompetence, following an insider deal that went wrong, and the firm is now under investigation for insider dealing. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the exploitation of small investors by stockbrokers, following the mis-selling of personal pensions and the mis-selling of additional voluntary contributions, is the third great financial services scandal of the Tory years? Will he assure the House that the Financial Services Authority will pay particular attention to the protection of small investors?

Mr. Byers: I sympathise with the difficulties that my hon. Friend's constituent has experienced. For the reasons that he has outlined, we felt that it was necessary to bring together the nine existing regulators into one body to regulate the financial services market. That body will have a single compensation scheme, which will help individuals who may have been subject to harmful treatment by stockbrokers or others involved in the financial services market. The aim of the new regime is to ensure that no individual, such as my hon. Friend's constituent, ever again has to suffer as a result of inappropriate conduct by people in the financial services market.

Skills Base

8. **Mrs. Anne Campbell** (Cambridge): What fiscal measures he has taken to encourage the development of skills in the work force. [61752]

The Paymaster General (Mr. Geoffrey Robinson): The £19 billion extra that the Government have found for education will lay the basis for the skills improvement that we need. Specifically, this year we are providing a further £100 million for information technology skills. Some £40 million of that will fund some 60 IT centres; £20 million will fund the provision of essential equipment for IT training; and a further £10 million will help to fund the university for industry.

Mrs. Campbell: I welcome the start-up funding that the Government have allocated to the university for industry, an exciting institution that will help to raise the skills of the unemployed and people who work in small businesses. If my hon. Friend has time, will he take a look at some of the software being developed by Cambridge Training and Development in my constituency? It has some innovative software to help adults to raise their levels of literacy and numeracy.

Mr. Robinson: I was in Cambridge this week with my hon. Friend, and was made aware of that interesting software package. That is an area that the university for industry will be anxious to develop further. Apart from what has already been made available, my hon. Friend will be pleased to learn that we will provide an extra £40 million next year to ensure that that exciting idea gets off the ground. All we are waiting for now is to hear that the Conservative Opposition oppose that, too.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): What has the Minister to say about those who have manufacturing skills

but who have lost their jobs during the past 18 months as a result of the recession made in Downing street? Would he guide those people towards gaining different skills, or would he prefer them simply to advertise their availability for hire in the yellow pages?

Mr. Robinson: We need no lectures from the Opposition about manufacturing industry. During the previous Government's self-made recession, a million jobs were lost in manufacturing, and output dropped by 7 per cent. We do not face such a prospect now. The news of an interest rate reduction, which the Opposition have failed to welcome, is very good news for manufacturing.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): What response would my hon. Friend give to an economist who shares his name but who is no relation, and who works for the Institute for Public Policy Research, an organisation known to both my hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Economic Secretary to the Treasury? At the Select Committee on Education and Employment this week, Peter Robinson dismayed me by saying that there was no evidence of any return to companies for training. There was plenty of evidence that there is a return to individuals, but none of any return to companies. How does my hon. Friend respond to that?

Mr. Robinson: Peter Robinson is eponymous with my younger brother, but is no relation of my family. He is obviously out of touch with the manufacturing sector. Perhaps he was not invited to one of our seminars, but if he had attended one, he would have heard time after time from industrialists of the close link between training and both the skills and competitiveness of their companies.

Fiscal and Monetary Stability

11. **Jacqui Smith** (Redditch): What plans he has to ensure fiscal and monetary stability. [61755]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Mr. Stephen Byers): We have put in place a new framework for monetary and fiscal policy and have taken tough action to deliver low inflation and sound public finances, both of which are essential for economic stability and sustainable growth.

Jacqui Smith: Can my right hon. Friend assure me that those policies will be sustained despite both lower world economic growth and the weasel words of the Opposition? In particular, can he confirm that the extra £40 billion of spending on schools and hospitals will be delivered despite moderated growth forecasts? Despite the fact that the Opposition want to reintroduce politics into the setting of interest rates, can my right hon. Friend reassure me that we shall maintain the independence of the Bank of England, which has brought such welcome news on interest rates today?

Mr. Byers: As I have already said, the Government welcome today's Bank of England decision to cut interest rates by 0.5 per cent. As the Bank said, the reason for the cut was a weakening in global economic activity. The tough decisions that the Government took to reduce the deficit by £20 billion, to give independence to the Bank of England and to ensure that we hit the inflation target of 2.5 per cent. have enabled us to steer a course of economic stability. That is why we can guarantee £40 billion for our schools and hospitals over the next three years. It is a matter of regret that the official Opposition call that a spending spree; most people regard it as an investment in the future of our schools and hospitals.

Dr. Vincent Cable (Twickenham): Is the Minister aware of warnings given in the Palace of Westminster yesterday by Mr. George Soros about the potential for British economic instability resulting from shocks of sterling instability? Can he confirm that the inter-party committee that he is currently establishing will specifically consider British preparations for entry to economic and monetary union, should entry prove to be in our national interest?

Mr. Byers: The committee announced a few weeks ago by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor is still subject to discussion among hon. Members, and we must await the outcome of those discussions before we know the details of its terms of reference. As for the evidence given yesterday by George Soros, on his own admission he has made some fundamental mistakes recently—he may have made one in his evidence to the Treasury Committee.

Yvette Cooper (Pontefract and Castleford): Given that the framework for stability that the Government have put in place has led to interest rates falling from a peak of just over 7 per cent., compared to a previous peak of 15 per cent., will my right hon. Friend promise that he will not follow the advice of the deputy Leader of the Opposition to give away the Bank of England's independence and have the Chancellor, rather than the Governor of the Bank of England, taking decisions on interest rates?

Mr. Byers: The time has come for the Conservative Opposition to reveal their position on independence for the Bank of England. It is because we have given the Bank of England independence that long-term interest rates are now at their lowest level for some 35 years and that we have today received the welcome news from the Bank that interest rates are to be cut by a 0.5 per cent. It is because we will not play party politics with interest rates that we gave independence to the Bank of England. It is a matter of regret that the Conservatives apparently still want to have that control, which will operate only for narrow party advantage, not in the national interest.

Mr. Nick Gibb (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton): Will the Chief Secretary explain why the National Audit Office was not asked to audit the economic assumptions used in the pre-Budget report? Will he also explain the discrepancy between the written answer that the Economic Secretary gave me, to the effect that there were no changes to the economic assumptions used, and the written answer that the Secretary of State for Social Security gave to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wells (Mr. Heathcoat-Amory), to the effect that the forecasts for social security spending had been changed because of changes to the economic assumptions used? Which answer is the truth, and why was there no audit?

Mr. Byers: The truth is the answer that I gave yesterday evening in the debate on this issue: that the conventions have not been changed. The pre-Budget report used unemployment figures for September, which was the latest month for which they were available. Because there was no change, as the code for fiscal stability clearly states, there was no need for the NAO to be involved.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): My right hon. Friend will be aware that, whenever there is a recession, as sure as night follows day the worst-affected areas are those where unemployment is already very bad. Does he agree that that problem demands some intervention, as evidenced by the Deputy Prime Minister's idea for a coalfield task force, and that such intervention will need to be repeated in many ways if there is a downturn in the economy, so that in those areas where unemployment rears its ugly head we manage to get rid of at least most of it?

Is my right hon. Friend also aware that there is one sector of the economy where employment is not affected? I refer to the Tories' moonlighting jobs—more than 200 of them. Under the new Labour Government, the Tories have been gathering in jobs left, right and centre. The shadow Chancellor already has four, and the next Register of Members' Interests will show an increase. If all the firms involved start paying in euros, you can bet your bottom dollar the Tories will not resign their non-executive directorships.

Mr. Byers: As always, I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I forgot to point out in my earlier contribution that, since the general election, not only has unemployment in the shadow Chancellor's seat fallen by 29 per cent., but he has gained four jobs himself. On the more serious point, my hon. Friend is right to highlight the important work of groups such as the coalfield task force, as well as the new deal for communities launched by the Deputy Prime Minister. We were elected as a Government who would work for all of our people, not the few. We intend to do just that, thus ensuring that we give new hope to the communities represented by my hon. Friend and me.

Manufacturing Employment

12. **Mr. Robert Syms** (Poole): What estimate he has made of the level of manufacturing employment in Britain in the current year and in the next two years. [61756]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ms Patricia Hewitt): In line with the convention adopted by previous Administrations, the Government do not publish employment forecasts.

Mr. Syms: That is very sad. Given the—*[Interruption.]*

Madam Speaker: Order. Mr. McNulty, you are not in a public meeting now. You have been making comments continually from a sedentary position throughout Question Time. They are unwanted and unnecessary.

Mr. Syms: Given the sad announcements of further redundancies today following a number of such announcements over the past several months, and with many workers facing unemployment and a hard Christmas, does the Minister not consider that, for workers, the Prime Minister's recent comments that economic stability is sexy was both insensitive and in very poor taste?

Ms Hewitt: As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is aware, the Government—this applies to all Ministers—are extremely concerned about every job lost. That is why we are investing so much—£5 billion—in the new deal to counter unemployment, and why we have put in place a rapid response task force to deal with large-scale redundancies when they arise.

I remind the hon. Gentleman that since the general election employment has risen by 400,000—that is one more person in a job every two minutes. Business fears most of all a return to the boom and bust of the Conservative years, to which we are putting an end.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): May I assure my hon. Friend that the view of manufacturing employers in a manufacturing constituency such as Burnley is that the most serious threat to the future of manufacturing stability and jobs in manufacturing is the present attitude of the Opposition to Europe and to the euro? Will the Government continue to recognise the need for, and give support to, research and development, which is crucial if Britain is to remain at the sharp end of manufacturing and be able to retain jobs in manufacturing, not only for the next two years but for the years beyond?

Ms Hewitt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is high time that Conservative Members stopped talking the economy down. However, given the competitive challenges that every sector of the economy faces in the modern world, and especially given the global conditions that we face at present, it is essential that we take every step possible to improve productivity. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer devoted the pre-Budget report particularly to a discussion of the measures that we can take to improve productivity through, for example, R and D, to which my hon. Friend referred.

Counterfeit Currency

13. **Mr. Gordon Prentice** (Pendle): What estimate he has made of the amount of counterfeit currency in circulation. [61758]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Ms Patricia Hewitt): There are no such estimates, but the number of counterfeit coins and notes is believed to be a very small proportion of the total number of notes and coins in circulation.

Mr. Prentice: It is disappointing that there are no estimates. When the new euro notes and coins start circulating in continental Europe in January 2002, there is a danger that counterfeiters could have a field day. Is it not the case that notes and coins could be circulating in

the United Kingdom even though they are not legal tender? For example, Marks and Spencer and other retail outlets could be accepting notes and coins. What are the Government doing to familiarise people in the United Kingdom with the euro—what it looks and feels like—so that they can distinguish between counterfeit notes and coins and the genuine thing?

Ms Hewitt: As my hon. Friend is aware, the Royal Mint and the Bank of England keep the security and the design features of United Kingdom notes and coins under continuous review to keep them secure against counterfeiting. The European central bank, which is responsible for the notes and coins issued within the euro, is similarly taking measures and drawing upon the expertise of central banks to ensure that the wave of counterfeiting that my hon. Friend fears does not materialise.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): I have in my possession a euro note from a Belgian bank. It looks remarkably similar to a gift token issued by Marks and Spencer. What satisfaction can the Minister give my constituents who hope to bring their euros back in perhaps the year 2003 after holidaying in Spain, for example, and spend them in their nearest Marks and Spencer store? What checks will there be to ensure that there is no confusion between the two different notes?

Ms Hewitt: As I have said, the European central bank and the central banks of the euro zone are taking steps to ensure that euro notes and coins are proof against counterfeiting. I am sure that Marks and Spencer, if it is not aware of the resemblance to which the hon. Lady has drawn the attention of the House, will be taking its own steps to ensure that no such confusion arises.

Education and Training

14. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What discussions he has had with representatives of business and industry about incentives to encourage them to contribute to education and training. [61759]

The Paymaster General (Mr. Geoffrey Robinson): In recent months we have been engaged in discussions with a wide range of representatives of business and industry during our seminars, one of which in particular focused on skills. A clear consensus has emerged between the Government and industry leaders on the importance of skills to the economy, and we are working out a joint programme.

Fiona Mactaggart: Several companies in my constituency were excited by the Chancellor's statement in his pre-Budget report that, as an incentive to businesses to offer expertise and management help to schools and colleges, businesses will be allowed to claim tax relief when they second staff to schools and colleges. All those companies are involved in formal and informal ways in supporting education in Slough. They are anxious to ensure that they are consulted about ways to make the proposal work before it is implemented. If it is based on real experience, the results could be excellent; if not, they could be rather poor.

Mr. Robinson: I am pleased that my hon. Friend welcomes the initiative. We are keen to bring industry and schools closer together. Tax relief for companies that second high-level staff to schools is a good idea in itself. I can assure my hon. Friend that there will be the fullest consultation on that, as there has been on all other matters that involve industry.

Smoking

3.32 pm

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): Today I present to the House our White Paper on tobacco which is entitled "Smoking Kills". That is a fact, and it has been known for years. That is why a lot of adults gave up smoking, but the number of adults who smoke has stopped falling. Worse still, the number of children who smoke is going up, with more girls than boys taking up the deadly habit.

It is a deadly habit. Out of 1,000 20-year-olds who smoke regularly, one will be murdered, six will die in road accidents, 250 will die in middle age from smoking and a further 250 will be killed by smoking later in life. Smoking causes 84 per cent. of deaths from lung cancer and 83 per cent. of deaths from other lung diseases such as bronchitis. It causes not just lung cancer, but cancer of the mouth, the larynx, the oesophagus, the bladder, the kidneys, the stomach and the pancreas. It causes one in seven deaths from heart disease. Smoking is very high among people who are severely mentally ill.

Smoking is now the principal avoidable cause of premature deaths in Britain. It hits the worst-off people hardest of all, and it is one of the principal causes of the health gap that leads to poorer people being ill more often and dying sooner. It harms people who do not smoke; smoking harms babies in the womb.

All those are good reasons why the Government are so determined to turn things round. Unless we tackle smoking, we cannot possibly achieve the reductions that everyone wants to see in deaths and illness from cancer and heart disease.

Unless we reduce smoking, we cannot reduce the inequalities in health that bear down most on the worst-off. We want to help existing smokers to quit the habit and help children and young people not to get addicted in the first place.

We face an uphill struggle because the tobacco companies are committed to doing everything they can to promote the sale of cigarettes. They have to keep recruiting new smokers to make up for the 120,000 of their loyal customers whom they kill off every year.

Most smokers take up the habit when they are children or young people. Few people start smoking once they are grown up. For years, the tobacco industry has poured millions into highly sophisticated advertising campaigns. People of all ages, including children, have been exposed to clever and eye-catching advertising material. All that will now change. Tobacco advertising is going to end, and it is going to end soon.

The White Paper spells out the measures that we will take, which will be targeted on children to protect them from being exposed to tobacco promotions. It will require sustained effort over a long period. Some benefits will not show up for decades, but unless we act now they will never show up. We will also be trying to help the seven out of 10 smokers who want to quit the habit. All that calls for a concerted plan of action, and that is what the White Paper outlines.

From 1989 until the last general election, the previous Government helped to block all European efforts to ban tobacco advertising and sponsorship. We changed that. We put Britain's full weight into getting a European directive through, and we succeeded. I pay tribute to the negotiating skills and powers of persuasion of my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health in achieving that.

As a result, a Europe-wide anti-smoking framework is in place. In this parliamentary Session, we propose to end tobacco advertising on billboards and in the printed media. Most tobacco sponsorship will end by 2003. Formula One motor racing, as a global event, may qualify for exemption until 2006 if—and only if—tobacco sponsorship funding and advertising are already being reduced.

The European directive is intended to keep to a minimum tobacco advertising in shops, and that will be fully applied in Britain through the law. The tobacco advertising ban will be backed up by an anti-smoking campaign. Over the next three years, we will put £50 million into an anti-smoking campaign. We want to make sure that children and young people no longer fall into the trap of seeing smoking as cool and a passport to adulthood.

We have negotiated with representatives of the hospitality industry a code of conduct for reducing smoking in public places. For a long time it has been illegal to sell cigarettes to children under 16. That law is frequently broken, so we are taking action to increase compliance by shopkeepers, and to promote more effective action by trading standards officers. Some individual shopkeepers and others knowingly and repeatedly flout that law. To deal with repeated offenders, we propose to introduce a new criminal offence, and we are looking at the practicalities of such a measure.

Following discussions with my officials, the National Association of Cigarette Machine Operators is issuing new rules on the siting and operation of cigarette vending machines, to make them inaccessible to children. We have also encouraged the companies that sell age-restricted goods such as alcohol, cigarettes and fireworks to develop an industry-wide proof of age card.

The package of measures is a tobacco advertising ban; a £50 million anti-smoking campaign; a crackdown on sales to children; a new criminal offence for repeated sales to children; new restrictions on vending machines; and the proof of age card. That package should make a real impact on the illegal sales of tobacco to children.

We must also consider those who are smoking already. Every 10 years, more than 1 million British people are killed by smoking. Most of the millions who will be killed by tobacco over the next few decades are already adult smokers. Most smokers say they want to stop, and they are the people we particularly want to help. If they keep on smoking, there is a 50:50 risk that they will eventually be killed by their habit, but if they stop smoking before they become ill, they will avoid most of the extra risk of death. It is really worth while for people to quit smoking.

As part of our effort to help those seven out of 10 adult smokers who want to quit, we are investing up to £60 million in the first ever comprehensive national health service scheme to help them to give up their addiction. That will involve all health professionals—midwives, health visitors, doctors, nurses, pharmacists and dentists—taking every appropriate opportunity to counsel patients to give up smoking.

That effort will be particularly targeted on smokers living in those deprived areas that have been chosen as health action zones. We shall encourage the use of

nicotine replacement therapy, especially targeted on health action zones where free NRT products will be available for the worst off. Health improvement programmes in every part of the country will be expected to address the need to reduce smoking, particularly in the worst-off areas.

As part of the drive to reduce tobacco consumption, the Government raised tobacco duties by just over 5 per cent. in December last year, and again this year. Those and other measures set out in the White Paper amount to a formidable plan of action to stop children taking up smoking and to help existing smokers to quit. To achieve that, we shall need to counter the efforts of the tobacco companies. Evidence shows that, for most of the past 20 years, they have been planning to counter the loss of sales that might follow an advertising ban. That time has now arrived, so we can be assured that they will be well prepared. I am certain that, as I speak, executives in the tobacco industry are planning their strategy to keep up tobacco sales.

We must get ahead of the game, which is all the more reason why everyone who cares about the health of the nation should work together to support this strategy. I am confident that everyone who cares about the nation's health will do that.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): I have never been a smoker and, personally, I dislike it. The Opposition welcome any sensible measures that reduce smoking, especially among the young. However, I have concerns and suspicions about some of the methods that the Secretary of State has outlined in today's much delayed White Paper.

The heavy emphasis on advertising is questionable. We have always known that the White Paper would not be a matter of principle, because the Labour party was prepared to sell its principles for £1 million. The Government believe that advertising is all right so long as it appears at speeds in excess of 150 mph.

The White Paper is largely about implementing a European Union directive. However, if Germany's challenge to the directive's validity is successful, the Government will be in a frightful mess.

Mr. Dobson: It is a German Government now.

Mr. Duncan: The Secretary of State may say that, but the way things are going with his party, it probably will be.

What is the latest position on that legal challenge, and when is a final decision likely to be made? Does the Secretary of State agree that, if brands are prevented from competing through advertising, they will instead compete more actively through price? The measures will also prevent advertising that encourages smokers to switch to less harmful brands, one hopes as a step towards giving up completely. Can the Secretary of State reassure the House that that sort of detrimental effect has been considered, and explain how those fears will not prove justified? Will he reconfirm that the advertising measures will allow genuine brand diversification companies to continue to advertise their non-tobacco products?

The Opposition fully support a voluntary proof-of-age scheme. Such voluntary measures will have the greatest impact on reducing smoking with the minimum of bossiness. We note what the Secretary of Stage said about the practicalities of introducing a new criminal offence and we shall look at that very closely, to ensure that it does not accidentally give rise to injustice.

It is revealing that nicotine patches are to be made available to those on low incomes. We understand that the incidence of smoking-related diseases is particularly pernicious among those on low incomes, so we can see what the Government are trying to do. However, it goes against everything that the Labour party has ever said about the health service. The Government are introducing a two-tier system of health service provision. They are introducing more of the rationing which they say does not exist. Is it not the case that making a nicotine patch available only to those on low incomes amounts to introducing a means test for health care? What is the relationship between nicotine patch manufacturers that have given money to the Labour party and those who will supply patches under this scheme?

If the European Court finds the directive illegal, will the Government seek to reintroduce it in United Kingdom legislation? Will the Secretary of State define the targets by which we can judge this policy's success or failure? What do the Government estimate the level of consumption among adults will be following the implementation of the measures? By how much will the White Paper reduce smoking? What will be the cost of nicotine patches to our health service under the means-tested proposals? How will that be offset by the reduced cost of treating smoking-related diseases set against the loss of tax revenues should smokers give up smoking?

We have waited a long time for this White Paper. We know that the Government's principles on this issue were for sale. We welcome any sensible moves to reduce smoking, especially among the young. The Secretary of State has watered down his original commitments. We look forward to reducing smoking in this country by persuasion rather than by bossiness, and by concentrating our attention on the young.

Mr. Dobson: It takes the biscuit when members of the Tory party who supported the previous Government talk about delays in the introduction of measures to tackle smoking. For 18 years they did virtually nothing, and for eight years they did everything they could to get help in cash or kind from the tobacco companies, and to block the European directive. They tried to prevent it at every turn, and it was only when we got into power and withdrew from the blocking minority, and persuaded other members of that minority to join us, that we got the European directive.

The Tories should make up their minds. Are they in favour of the directive or against it? We are confident that the directive is valid. It is strange that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), who is one of the fanatical anti-marketeers, is now praying in aid—and no doubt in hope—the possibility that the German Government's challenge to the legality of the directive will be successful. We are satisfied about its legality. Most of the hon. Gentleman's comments bore a marked resemblance to the briefing drawn up over a long period by the Tobacco Manufacturers Association.

The hon. Gentleman was concerned about brand diversification. That practice was invented by the tobacco industry when it first contemplated the prospect of an

[Mr. Dobson]

advertising ban. It is all right if they diversify their brands, but we will not allow advertising that, in effect, uses a shirt or a pair of shoes to promote cigarette sales. The hon. Gentleman talked about injustice and about the sleazy people who, for profit, sell cigarettes time and again to children who are too young to smoke. The biggest injustice is the injustice done to children. Those people sell cigarettes to children knowing that half of them will die from smoking those cigarettes.

The hon. Gentleman is apparently as ignorant about nicotine patches as he is about everything else. Nicotine patches are available over the counter, not on prescription. We intend to provide patches in limited circumstances to the most deprived people in the most deprived areas as part of a course of treatment to help them cure their addiction.

The hon. Gentleman has been spreading slurs about the Novartis company, which is a reputable, international drug company. He has suggested that, because it sponsored an event at a Labour party conference, it has bought the Labour party. We also received money from Tate and Lyle, so presumably he thinks that that is why patients in hospitals get sugar in their tea. Perhaps he thinks that we should withdraw the use of the Novartis drug, cyclosporin, which is given to people who have had organ transplants, or Voltarol, which is used extensively for people suffering from arthritis. The hon. Gentleman's charge is absurd—as absurd as everything else that he has done.

Our hope and intention is that, by 2010—for it will take a long time—1.5 million fewer people will be smoking. I hope that our proposed measures will be even more successful, but that is an ambitious target, given that the number of adults who smoke has begun to rise, and has been seriously augmented by the large number of children who took up smoking while an idle, feckless Government did nothing about it.

Mr. Kevin Barron (Rother Valley): Many organisations that are concerned about public health will welcome both the statement and the White Paper, as will the many thousands of people who work in the health service and must deal every day with the victims of tobacco addiction. I especially welcome the plan of action to cure nicotine addiction, which has been known about for 40 years but whose existence has been consistently denied. At long last, we have a Government who will act in this regard.

In view of what was said by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan), may I ask whether the White Paper contains any measures that could cure the Tory party of its addiction to the tobacco companies?

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): I doubt it.

Mr. Dobson: I agree with my hon. Friend.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Mr. Barron) on all that he has done over the years to promote efforts to reduce the number of smokers in this country. It should be remembered—this needs to be repeated whenever we hear propaganda from the tobacco companies, either directly or through their hired hands—that, until very recently, those companies denied that tobacco smoking caused lung cancer, and that even more recently they have denied that it is addictive. Both assertions were plain, downright lies. The tobacco companies knew that they were lies when they uttered and publicised them.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): The Liberal Democrats approve of the direction of Government policy. It makes a welcome change from the 18 years of hypocrisy during which the Tory party was persistently on the side of the tobacco industry, as a result of which hundreds of thousands of people paid the ultimate price.

We agree with the Government that smoking must be deglamourised. Given that his Department said this morning that those who sell cigarettes are effectively child killers, does the Secretary of State not think it inconsistent, if we are to have secondary legislation this year to ban billboard and other advertising, not to ensure that it comes into effect this year? According to the White Paper, it will come into effect as soon as is practicable, but five years is far too long. If we are to have legislation this year—given the formula one fiasco last year, and the lesson that the Government have learnt from it—can we not have legislation at the same time to ban tobacco sponsorship?

If we are really keen to stop young people smoking, will the Secretary of State revise the targets for reducing smoking among young people? A reduction from 13 per cent. to 9 per cent. over 12 years is hardly a tough target; the right hon. Gentleman really ought to go further and faster.

If the Government share the view that every citizen should have the right to be free from smoke in every public place, will the right hon. Gentleman ensure that, if the leisure industry does not agree to such arrangements, it too will be told that legislation may be introduced to require it to provide non-smoking alternative venues?

At home, the Government are committed to stopping 120,000 deaths a year from smoking. Will there be the same commitment abroad to combating the activities of the international tobacco companies, which are determined to recruit many people to lifelong addiction by using what is, in fact, the ultimate weapon of personal self-destruction?

Mr. Dobson: I suppose that I should thank the hon. Gentleman for his somewhat limited welcome for our proposal. All I can say is that it has been almost unreservedly welcomed by the Cancer Research Campaign, the British Heart Foundation and Action on Smoking and Health. We have met virtually every one of their requirements.

As for the timing of the intended measures, the hon. Gentleman should wait to see the regulations that we will introduce. As for similar efforts overseas, we support whole-heartedly the initiative that Dr. Brundtland has launched at the World Health Organisation to put together an international effort to restrain the international efforts of tobacco companies.

Mr. Joe Ashton (Bassetlaw): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his excellent report, but there was one word that he did not mention: pubs. Is he aware that public houses are the only place where members of the public gather where there are no no-smoking areas?

Despite ten-minute Bills being passed by the House and constant requests to the breweries, they adamantly refuse to introduce no-smoking areas.

Will my right hon. Friend ensure in the legislation that breweries do not get a licence to sell alcohol from a local authority without providing no-smoking areas in their public houses? Will he make a start on this House, because the conditions in the Stranger's Bar are absolutely dreadful? On December nights, the door must be held wide open because the staff can hardly breathe and the extractor fans do not work. Despite many others making requests, a no-smoking area in the Tea Room is still not available. In many parts of this House, people are entitled to have a segregated no-smoking area, but despite the complaints we make, it never happens.

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome for our proposals. We have been having serious negotiations with the hospitality industry and those who are responsible for licensed premises. They are introducing a new code of conduct, which—

Mr. Ashton: We have heard that 10 times before.

Mr. Dobson: I know, but let me finish. We have made it clear that, if the code of conduct does not deliver what those companies are promising, we will have to resort to legislation. We would, however, rather have the enthusiastic support of people in the licensed trade, restaurants and hotels. Many of them are gradually realising, as did the airlines, bus companies and train companies, that most people would rather be in a smoke-free area.

It is rather odd that, as far as I know, smoking has always been banned in the Chamber, but it was not banned by us. No one other than hon. Members is responsible for the rules in other parts of the House. I would be happy to see it setting an example.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): People will welcome the Secretary of State's analysis that it is vital to get young people who take up smoking to understand that they are doing what children do, not what adults take up. Will he give more prominence to the work of Dr. Malcolm Green and his colleagues at the British Lung Foundation, because, as well as hearts, lungs matter? Sometimes that is overlooked.

While considering where bans on smoking could be made, can we look forward to powers for taxi drivers to ban smoking in their cabs, which they have not, up to now, been able to do?

Will the Secretary of State continue to be aware that the ban on promotion might make a difference of between 1 and 7 per cent? The target should be to achieve the same level of reduction as was achieved 10 years ago on drink driving. The number of occasions when young men would drink and drive was cut by two thirds in two years, with no change of law or in sentencing. It was done effectively through the youth media, so, instead of Ministers saying that things are cool or uncool, it is far more useful for disc jockeys and others to talk about the dangers of smoking on their news and current affairs programmes. That would be more effective than a public service or health message.

Mr. Dobson: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point about trying to get a change of view, a change of culture, among the people concerned. As I always say, he deserves some congratulation on his contribution to changing public attitudes towards drink driving. That change in attitude was backed by the law—perhaps set on by the law—but, above all, habits were altered by a change in attitude. That is what we are trying to bring about. Therefore, I am prepared to consider all forms of advertising to try to catch the attention of young people.

It is sometimes suggested that young people understand the dangers that smoking poses to health, but there may be some evidence that many of them do not. As the dangers of smoking have been advertised in the adult world for the past 10 years, we tend to think that young people are aware of them, and that efforts have not been targeted on them. However, evidence from the United States, for example, shows that the best way of turning young people off smoking is by portraying accurately those who run the companies as a set of grasping people who, for the sake of profit, are willing to murder people.

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): It has indeed been an exciting week for cancer research, starting with work by British researchers on cervical tests that was funded by the Cancer Research Campaign and that will, over the next few years, save women's lives. My right hon. Friend fully supported that work. The week is nearing its end with today's announcement on cancer prevention. Does my right hon. Friend agree that it ill befits an Opposition to take seats on tobacco company boards and to take day trips to regattas and other United Kingdom events sponsored by the tobacco industry when that industry makes millions of pounds in profit and, as he said, kills our people? Does he agree that we should be as ruthless with tobacco companies' profits as those companies have been with their customers?

Mr. Dobson: I have always been rather reluctant to get into upbraiding anyone for their personal habits, and I shall not start now. However, I object to the habits of the tobacco companies' highly paid executives, who spend their time promoting something that they know will kill half of those who use it.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Has the Secretary of State made any estimate of the tax revenue loss that would occur should he achieve anything like his stated target of 1.5 million fewer smokers by 2010? If so, will he tell us how he or his Treasury colleagues propose replacing that lost tax revenue, or what Government expenditure cuts would be necessitated by such a loss?

Mr. Dobson: The present Government, including the present Chancellor, support the policies that I have outlined today. In each successive Budget we intend to increase the price of cigarettes above the rate of inflation. If that action eventually has an impact on tax income, we shall address that problem when it arises. The sooner the problem arises and the greater it is, the better off the country will be.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I welcome the statement as a great step forward in trying to reduce the number of young people taking up smoking. However, will my right hon. Friend tell the House what he will do to monitor the diversionary activities in which the tobacco companies are involved? I am concerned

[Dr. Phyllis Starkey]

about their promotional activities at night clubs and other venues frequented by young people. I had direct experience of those activities when my daughter came home with promotional material designed not only to persuade her to smoke but to recruit her friends to do so. Will he take action to stop such activity?

Mr. Dobson: I am glad to say that all those matters are covered by the directive. The dishing out of promotional literature in night clubs—or youth clubs—will be banned, as will the issuing of free cigarettes, free sunglasses and all the other things that the tobacco companies have been using to promote the sale of cigarettes among young people. All those activities are covered by the directive which Conservative Members obstructed for the best part of 10 years, and which my right hon. Friend the Minister for Public Health negotiated through the maze of European structures.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): I am a non-smoker, although I have to confess that I have taken pleasure in watching Benson and Hedges cricket—a game to which I am addicted. Historically, when does the Secretary of State believe that tobacco companies embarked on brand advertising? More importantly for the future, given that law enforcement officers believe that the drugs trade is now a significant and measurable element in world gross domestic product—although, obviously, without advertising—what does the White Paper forecast the fall in tobacco consumption will be over the next decade?

Mr. Dobson: We have targets rather than forecasts. The Government are putting an extra £35 million into stepping up the effort to reduce alcohol and tobacco smuggling. It is clear that the market that has been created is being supplied on the cheap by all sorts of dubious traders. Interestingly, the tobacco companies, which claim to be disturbed by the problem, do not seem able to cut off the supply.

Mr. Ken Maginnis (Fermanagh and South Tyrone): Although my party welcomes any measure to reduce smoking, particularly among young children, I fear that the proposals will place a great responsibility on organisations such as the Tobacco Alliance—a group of responsible small shopkeepers who sell cigarettes within the law, but are being taxed at 5 per cent. per year, to the advantage of the bootleggers whom the Secretary of State deprecates. What can the Secretary of State do about the £3 billion of trade involved? Has he been to the coast of France and Belgium to see the extent of the trade? There is no control over it. I am told that 80 per cent. of the trade is carried out north of the Watford Gap, so it is not peculiar to coastal regions. Unless the Secretary of State tackles that, he might as well forget about his proposals, which, I repeat, we welcome.

Mr. Dobson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome for our proposals. We take smuggling seriously. I understand that the loss of revenue is about £1 billion—which may interest those who are bothered about revenue lost to the Government. The Conservatives did nothing about that when they were in office. We are putting more effort into attempting to counter smuggling, although I have not been to the coast of France and Belgium to check the situation. The tobacco companies must bear some of the responsibility, because their products are being smuggled. If they wanted to trace them to where they came from with markings on the packets, they could do so.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I should declare an interest, although it is not a registerable one. There is a Rothmans factory in Spennymoor in my constituency employing 550 people. It is a good company that plays a full part in the life of the community. It is highly regarded by its employees and has a good relationship with the Manufacturing, Science and Finance Union. My other interest in the issue is that my father died at the age of 51 from emphysema, probably caused by smoking Woodbines, which were popular among the working class of his generation.

My right hon. Friend is not making a pitch for the votes of the 15 million smokers, who give £11 billion to the tax man—considerably more than they cost the health service. Nevertheless, I wholly welcome the report. Will he work with me and the Tobacco Workers Alliance to ensure that, if the jobs of my 550 constituents in an area of high unemployment disappear through the activities of my party, we shall ensure that there are other jobs for them to go to?

Mr. Dobson: I know about the death of my right hon. Friend's father. I can confirm that representatives of the tobacco workers have been consulted throughout the process, and will continue to be consulted.

It is worth noting that, in the previous 18 years, the number of people employed in the tobacco industry fell from 37,000 to 9,000, largely as a result of increased automation of the processes. That has been the principal cause of job losses, which have proceeded apace. As the tobacco company bosses are concentrating so hard on brand diversification, perhaps they might pay a little attention to diversifying the job opportunities of their employees. I do not think that we will upset most smokers by trying to help them give up smoking, as all the surveys show that seven out of 10 smokers would like to give up, but unfortunately they are addicted.

Dr. Peter Brand (Isle of Wight): First, I welcome the emphasis placed on stopping children and young people starting to smoke in the first place.

Secondly, I am disappointed by the help that is being offered to the seven out of 10 who want to stop smoking, and who probably express that wish 10 or 20 times a day. People such as myself—I am addicted to my pipe—require consistent help to give up the pernicious habit. There is a great deal of evidence that people need support for at least six to 12 weeks. The Government are missing an opportunity by not offering people a supply of Nicorette as a condition of attendance at a clinic, as that would encourage people to turn up and to be successful in their attempts to stop smoking. A week's supply is neither here nor there and will not help anyone to make a real effort. Will the Secretary of State look at the results of the pilot project, and extend it when it is seen to be cost-effective?

Mr. Dobson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his welcome. Although he is not a lawyer, he is probably

more learned on this subject, given his medical background. I hope that he will not be too disappointed by our proposals. As I said, we want a concerted effort by the national health service, so that the medical, nursing, midwifery and pharmacy professions work in the same direction and take every opportunity to help. We intend to start by targeting effort on the worst-off people in the poorest areas, who almost automatically have a high incidence of smoking compared with well-off people in prosperous areas.

As part of their treatment, some people will be offered free patches for a week or perhaps longer. I understand that the patches cost £15 a week over the counter. Most smokers spend more than that on smoking, so if they are given some support, get to know how it feels to use the patches and benefit from them, and provided that clinical support continues, we hope that they will think it a bargain to spend a bit less on patches than they were spending on the cigarettes that were harming them.

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): May I add my congratulations and those of the vast majority of my general practitioner colleagues to my right hon. Friend? I have been watching the clock, and my calculations are that between 10 and 12 people have died in Britain from smoking since the beginning of his statement. Therefore, about 400 people a day need to be recruited to start smoking just to make up those numbers. How can we change the culture among young people from the idea that smoking is somehow glamorous, so that they consider it dangerous? Rather than cracking down on smoking, we need to show people the damage that it causes and that it is in their best interests if they never take it up in the first place.

Mr. Dobson: I thank my hon. and medical Friend for his welcome. We are trying to learn from campaigns in other parts of the world in an effort to reduce the number of children who are taking up smoking. However, it is a cultural matter, so we cannot simply take something off the peg in Massachusetts or California and assume that it will work in Scunthorpe or Surrey. We need to address what motivates and influences young people in our country. We have a substantial sum of money to do that, and we are prepared to contemplate almost any form of advertising and advocacy provided that we are convinced that it will work.

Mr. Barron: On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: I take points of order after statements.

Business of the House

4.15 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): With permission, I should like to make a statement about the business for next week.

MONDAY 14 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Greater London Authority Bill.

TUESDAY 15 DECEMBER—Until 7 o'clock, conclusion of Second Reading of the Greater London Authority Bill.

Debate on the common fisheries policy on a Government motion.

Proceedings on the Consolidated Fund Bill.

WEDNESDAY 16 DECEMBER—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House, which will include the usual three-hour pre-recess debate.

Motion to approve the Modernisation Committee's report on the parliamentary calendar and sessional orders.

THURSDAY 17 DECEMBER—Second Reading of the Scottish Enterprise Bill.

The provisional business for the first week back after the Christmas recess will be as follows:

MONDAY 11 JANUARY—Second reading of the Rating (Valuation) Bill.

TUESDAY 12 JANUARY—Second Reading of the Local Government Bill.

WEDNESDAY 13 JANUARY—Until 2 o'clock, there will be debates on the motion for the Adjournment of the House.

Opposition day [2nd Allotted Day].

There will be a debate on a motion in the name of the Liberal Democrats, the subject to be announced.

THURSDAY 14 JANUARY—Motion to take note of the outstanding reports of the Public Accounts Committee to which the Government have replied. Details will be given in the *Official Report*.

FRIDAY 15 JANUARY—The House will not be sitting.

[Thursday 14 January:

Motion to take note of the outstanding reports of the Public Accounts Committee to which the Government have replied. Details will be given in the Official Report. Relevant Reports:

NHS Supplies in England HC349 11 December 1997 Cm 3880

Health and Safety in NHS Acute Hospital Trusts in England HC350 13 December 1997 Cm 3880

South and West Regional Health Authority: the disposal of SWIFT HC358 18 December 1997 Cm 3880

MOD: Management of Utilities HC359 19 December 1997 Cm 3880

Coronary Heart Disease in Northern Ireland HC381 14 January 1998 Cm 3893

Department of the Environment (NI) Control of Belfast Action Teams' Expenditure HC382 15 January 1998 Cm 3893

Resignation of the Chief Executive of English Heritage HC392 18th January 1998 Cm 3894

Governance and Management of Overseas Courses at the Swansea Institute of Higher Education HC393 18 January 1998 Cm 3894

Property Services in English Occupied Royal Palaces: Responsibilities for Royal Household Remuneration and the Provision of Accommodation HC94 17 December 1997 Cm 3936

Her Majesty's Stationery Office: Trade with Uzbekistan and 1995 Trading Fund Accounts HC405 21 January 1998 Cm 3894

MAFF: Tackling Common Agricultural Policy Irregularities HC406 22 January 1998 Cm 3894

ODA: Irregularities in the Encashment of Pension Payments in Amman, Jordan HC407 23 January 1998 Cm 3894.

Criminal Legal Aid Means Testing in the Magistrates' Courts HC416 6 February 1998 Cm 3936

HM Customs and Excise: The Seizure of Drug Traffickers' Assets HC417 29 January 1998 Cm 3936

United Kingdom Atomic Energy Authority: Sale of Facilities Services Division HC418 30 January 1998 Cm 3936

HM Customs & Excise: Appropriation Account Matters 1995–96 HC424 4 February 1998 Cm 3936

Waltham Forest Housing Action Trust: Progress in Regenerating Housing Estates HC425 18 February 1998 Cm 3936

The Department of Trade and Industry Redundancy Payment Service: The Management of Recovery of Debt HC426 11 February 1998 Cm 3936

Aid to Indonesia HC436 12 February 1998 Cm 3936

Motability HC444 15 February 1998 Cm 3936

Child Support Agency: Client Funds Account 1996–97 HC313 11 March 1998 Cm 3955

Excess Vote 1996–97: (Northern Ireland) Department of Education (Vote 2) Teachers' Superannuation HC592 12 March 1998

Excess Votes 1996–97: Ministry of Defence (Class 1: Votes 1, 2 and 3) HC593 12 March 1998

Department for Education and Employment: Remploy Limited HC339 18 March 1998 Cm 3955

Highlands & Islands Enterprise: Value for Money Review of Performance Measurement HC325 25 March 1998 Cm 3955

Vacant Office Property 395 1 April 1998 Cm 3973

Measures to Combat Housing Benefit Fraud HC366 26 March 1998 Cm 3955

Charity Commission: Regulation and Support of Charities HC408 2 April 1998 Cm 3973

HM Customs and Excise: Checking Large-Traders' VAT Liability HC445 5 April 1998 Cm 3973

The Prison Service: Prison Catering HC419 8 April 1998 Cm 3973

Inland Revenue: Employer Compliance Reviews HC357 3 May 1998 Cm 4004

NHS Scotland: Cataract Surgery in Scotland HC546 7 May 1998 Cm 4004

Crown Prosecution Service HC526 10 May 1998 Cm 4004

FCO: Fraud at Amman Embassy HC553 13 May 1998 Cm 4004

The Annual Report of the European Court of Auditors HC729 17 May 1998 Cm 4004

OFWAT: Regulation of Water Industry HC483 20 May 1998 Cm 4004

FCO: Contingent Liabilities in the Dependent Territories HC435 21 May 1998 Cm 4004

Northern Ireland: The Industrial Research and Technology Unit HC429 24 May 1998 Cm 4015

Protecting Environmentally Sensitive Areas HC513 3 June 1998 Cm 4021

The Management of Building Projects at English Higher Education Institutions HC558 4 June 1998 Cm 4021

The Construction of the Southampton Oceanography Centre HC608 17 June 1998 Cm 4055

The Skye Bridge HC348 21 June 1998 Cm 4041

The Privatisation of Belfast International Airport HC427 24 June 1998 Cm 4060

Northern Ireland Social Security Agency: The Administration of Disability Living Allowance HC527 25 June 1998 Cm 4060

Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions: The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme HC613 27 June 1998 Cm 4055

The Contract to Develop and Update the Replacement National Insurance Recording System HC472 1 July 1998 Cm 4041

The Private Finance Initiative: The First Four Design, Build, Finance and Operate Roads Contracts HC580 2 July 1998 Cm 4041

MOD: Sale of the Married Quarters Estate HC518 8 July 1998 Cm 4055

The Sale of the Stationery Office HC599 9 July 1998 Cm 4055

The Management of Sickness Absence in the Metropolitan Police Service HC594 15 July 1998 Cm 4055

Ministry of Defence Appropriation Accounts 1996–97 HC671 16 July 1998 Cm 1055

Intervention Board Executive Agency: Qualification of Appropriation Account 1996–97 18 July 1998 Cm 4055

Appropriation Account 1996–97 Class V, Vote 7: Passenger Rail Services HC625 22 July 1998 Cm 4055

HM Customs and Excise: Matters on the 1996–97 Accounts HC717 23 July 1998 Cm 4055

Inland Revenue: The Monitoring and Control of Tax Exemptions for Charities HC728 24 July 1998 Cm 4055

Appropriation Accounts 1996–97 Class IX: Department for Education and Employment (Overpayments to Training and Enterprise Councils) HC704 25 July 1998 Cm 4055

The PFI Contracts for Bridgend and Fazakerley Prisons HC499 29 July 1998 Cm 4041

Appropriation Accounts 1996–97 Class XII, Vote 1: (Administered Social Security Benefits and Other Payments) HC570 30 July 1998 Cm 4069

HM Coastguard: HM Coastguard: Civil Maritime Search and Rescue HC741 31 July 1998 Cm 4069

The Sale of AEA Technology HC749 5 August 1998 Cm 4069

Getting Value for Money in Privatisations HC992 3 September 1998 Cm 4075

The Purchase of the Read Codes and the Management of the NHS Centre for Coding and Classification HC657 6 August 1998 Cm 4069

The Management of Growth in the English Further Education Sector HC 665 7 August 1998 Cm 4069

Countering Anti-Competitive Behaviour in the Telecommunications Industry HC842 12 August 1998 Cm 4069

Privatisation of the Rolling Stock Leasing Companies HC782 9 August 1998 Cm 4069

Managing the Millennium Threat HC816 19 August 1998 Cm 4069

HM Treasury: Resource Accounting and Resource-Based Supply HC731 13 August 1998 Cm 4069]

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): I thank the right hon. Lady for giving us the business for next week and the provisional business for the week after we return from the recess. I wish her a very happy Christmas between those two weeks.

Will the right hon. Lady confirm that the Prime Minister will give a full statement to the House on Monday following the Vienna summit? Will she also confirm that, in accordance with the traditions of the House, there will be a free vote when we consider the Modernisation Committee's report on Wednesday, and that that free vote will include all Labour Members and members of Her Majesty's Government? In her speech in

that debate, will she be able to meet one of the Committee's simpler recommendations, and give the dates of the Easter and Whitsun Adjournments?

In giving the provisional business for the week after the Christmas recess, the right hon. Lady did not mention the House of Lords reform Bill. Do the Government intend to introduce that Bill in January? Will she give the assurance for which we have asked that all stages of the Bill will be taken on the Floor of the House?

Will the right hon. Lady arrange a special debate, in the week or fortnight after we return, on the millennium dome and on the responsibilities of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for that major project, bearing in mind the fact that there will then be less than a year before its opening?

On a very important matter, will the right hon. Lady arrange for a statement next week by the Prime Minister or, if that is not possible, by the Foreign Secretary on the criteria governing relations with friendly democratic states? May we be told what has happened to the doctrine of non-interference in the internal affairs of such nations? Will the Prime Minister or Foreign Secretary explain in that statement what the reaction of Her Majesty's Government would be if a Member of either House of Parliament or of the Northern Ireland Assembly were arrested abroad on political charges related to the Province?

Mrs. Beckett: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his Christmas good wishes, and return them to hon. Members on both sides of the House. He asks whether my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is likely to make a statement on the outcome of the Vienna Council; I anticipate that he will. I take this opportunity to apologise to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who last week asked me what I thought was the same question, although it turns out that it was not, which meant that I told him that the Prime Minister would make a statement about a matter on which he was not intending to make one. I apologise for that misunderstanding.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the Modernisation Committee, and about whether there will be a free vote in the debate. He will be well aware that some of the proposals have been made by the Government, and there will be a free vote—at least on this side of the House. I hope that that will apply to the Opposition also. I fear that I cannot undertake at this moment to give the dates of the Easter and Whitsun recesses, but I shall bear in mind the hon. Gentleman's request.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether we anticipate introducing the Lords reform Bill during January. I hope that the Bill will be introduced quickly. I am aware of the Opposition's view that all stages should be taken on the Floor of the House, and that is the kind of issue that I am happy to discuss through the usual channels.

I fear that I cannot undertake to offer an early, special debate on the millennium dome, or on the responsibilities in that matter of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry. The matter is raised continually in this House by Conservative Members, and it seems to me that they have ample opportunities to air it.

Finally, I fear that I cannot undertake to provide a statement—either by the Prime Minister or by the Foreign Secretary—on the broad issue of relations with friendly democratic states if, as I take it to be the case, the hon. Gentleman is referring, not very elliptically, to the case of Senator Pinochet. The hon. Gentleman will be as aware as I am of the operation and delicacy of the sub judice rule. I take the point that that is not quite what he is asking, but it would be quite hard to have a debate of the kind for which he has asked—

Sir Patrick Cormack: Or a statement.

Mrs. Beckett: Indeed. For the reasons which have led the hon. Gentleman to raise the matter, it would be hard to have a debate or a statement that touched on the issues without trespassing on the territory of the sub judice rule.

The hon. Gentleman asked what my view would be should a Member of this House be arrested overseas. I hope that it will not be thought unduly frivolous if I say that it would probably depend on who it was, frankly.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): If, as I suspect, in Wednesday's debate on the modernisation of the House, there is a proposal for an extra week off for Members of Parliament to coincide with half term, would it not make more sense, and be more acceptable to the public, if there was a week or two in September when the House returned? There is a problem in terms of the number of holidays that Members of Parliament can have. To add another week without some compensatory sitting week at another time would not be acceptable to a lot of people out there.

Mrs. Beckett: My hon. Friend knows the great respect that I have for him, his concerns and his record in this House and outside. For once, however, I must take issue with him. The Modernisation Committee has proposed the option of a non-sitting week. If time can be found—and I am not necessarily saying that it will be in the coming Session, although the Government will do our best—it will be for the House to reach a view on a free vote. As I am sure my hon. Friend is aware, that is not by any means the same thing as a holiday.

All hon. Members have a vast range of pressing duties, and the Committee chose quite deliberately not to call the proposed week a constituency week, because there are many other issues to which hon. Members must give their time. My hon. Friend will know—although he may not sympathise—that many hon. Members feel that we ought to devote a little more time to liaising with parliamentarians in other EU member states. *[Laughter.]* That might not appeal to my hon. Friend. There is concern in the EU about the level of scrutiny that Parliaments in member states are able to give to EU business, and about whether we have sufficiently good liaison with Parliaments that may share some of our concerns.

On his suggestion about September, my hon. Friend may not yet have had a chance to study the Committee report, but he should be aware that it also identified the fact that we believe that it should be open to both Select and Standing Committees to designate a Committee week in September when they might be able to devote their attention to their work and bridge the gap that is sometimes thought to open up.

I am especially sensitive to the suggestion that we are asking the House to vote itself extra holidays. As someone with a marginal seat, I have had only one holiday a year for about 15 years, and that in the summer recess.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): Some of us were privileged to attend this morning a moving, non-

[Mr. Paul Tyler]

denominational, ecumenical service to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights. The anniversary is precisely today. Does the Leader of the House realise that there is an irony, because there was reference in the service to General Pinochet, so obviously the matter is not sub judice in Westminster abbey, even though it is in the House?

With that anniversary in mind, is it not high time we had a full debate, in Government time, on progress towards an ethical foreign policy? I understand that the Foreign Affairs Select Committee is about to produce a report. Can we have a debate early in the new year? I hope that the Leader of the House will be able to give us an assurance that all the recommendations of the Scott inquiry into the iniquities of the previous regime will be fully assessed in that debate.

On the matter of ethics in political life at home, has the Leader of the House noted the fact that the Conservative party has refused to implement its own promises on secret and foreign donations?

Mrs. Beckett: I am indeed aware that it is the 50th anniversary of the declaration of human rights. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary attended the service in Westminster abbey, in the presence of the Princess Royal. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) is hosting a reception this afternoon; my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development is addressing a special session of the United Nations General Assembly; and the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin) will be attending a commemorative event in Vienna, where it is intended to issue a joint United Kingdom-German proposal to publish an annual European Union human rights report. A great deal is being done, quite rightly, to commemorate what is a very important anniversary.

The hon. Gentleman highlighted an issue of concern to hon. Members, and a matter on which I am confident that you, Madam Speaker, are very sensitive: the operation of the sub judice rule here. He will know that Parliament acts in a special and separate capacity: we are the law-making body, and it is right that we are especially sensitive and careful.

The hon. Gentleman asked for a full debate on foreign policy in Government time. There was a full debate on foreign affairs only recently, in the debates on the Gracious Speech, but I will certainly bear in mind his further request, and indeed his concomitant request for a full assessment of the recommendations in the Scott report. I am mindful of the range of those recommendations, and the Government want to implement them and follow the spirit of the proposed safeguards.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I had observed—I cannot remember whether he asked whether I was surprised by it—the fact that the Conservative party is yet again not adhering to what it claimed to be its own rules and views on announcements of the source of funding. I had observed it, and I am sorry to say that I was not surprised.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My right hon. Friend will know that the European Commission has proposed a ban, from 1 January 1999, on four antibiotic compounds that are used as growth promoters in animal feed. I understand that the issue will be discussed at the Agriculture Council on Monday and Tuesday next week. I know that we have a crowded schedule next week, but the issue is important to many of us. Will it be possible for my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture to make a statement to the House on the Government's position?

Mrs. Beckett: I hear what my hon. Friend says and I understand his view that the issue is important, although I must admit that I had not appreciated that it was to be discussed. I cannot promise him to find time for a statement, but I feel confident that my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture will be happy to acquaint him with the Government's view on the matter.

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): Will the Leader of the House consider publishing next week a list of the all-party parliamentary groups that have satisfied the House authorities of their viability? The number of such groups has exploded in this Parliament to the congestion of the Whip and to some conflict, to the extent that outside bodies can be disappointed by the number of Members of Parliament who turn up.

Mrs. Beckett: I was not aware that it was within my sphere of responsibility to publish such a list, but I am happy to consider the right hon. Gentleman's proposal. I take his point, because it is difficult to strike a balance, and it must often be struck afresh in a new Parliament. So many entirely well-meaning and worthy people have a passionate interest in this or that subject and urge Members of Parliament to set up or join various groups. I will not conceal from the right hon. Gentleman that I have long since replied to such people that there is a limit to the number of causes that I can support, and I have declined to join many of the groups that I could have joined. I take his point that it leads to disappointment when not as many Members attend events as was hoped, but that is also a feature of the enormous pressure on the diaries of hon. Members. No one could possibly undertake everything that people would like us to do.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): When may we debate the horrific abuse of medicinal drugs in care homes? A debate could examine the successful exercise conducted by the school of old age psychiatry in Manchester. The researchers went into care homes and examined the use of neuroleptic drugs on the elderly. They found that in more than half the cases in which signs of dementia were shown by patients, the cause was not senility, but the over-use of neuroleptic drugs. Other trials in Glasgow have found that many people end their days in misery and confusion because care homes wish to minimise trouble. Many elderly people are defenceless victims of such over-use of drugs and it causes them

immense damage. The exercise carried out in Manchester should be replicated throughout the country. When may we have a debate to ensure that that is done?

Mrs. Beckett: The whole House will share my hon. Friend's concern. I cannot promise him time in the near future for a special debate, but I can remind him, first, that it is health questions next week and, secondly and perhaps more helpfully, that we will have the recess Adjournment debate in which any issue can be raised. My hon. Friend may be successful in catching your eye, Madam Speaker.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): In the light of the unsatisfactory replies given by the Secretary of State for Health to the House on Tuesday, will the Leader of the House arrange for an early debate on the subject of the mentally ill? Does she recognise that an early debate would afford an opportunity for the Government to give the categorical commitment, which the Secretary of State failed to give on Tuesday, that all new psychiatric units will exclusively comprise single-sex wards?

Mrs. Beckett: I am a little surprised by the hon. Gentleman's tone. Having heard a large part of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State's statement and its aftermath, I understood that it had been widely welcomed everywhere, except on the Conservative Benches. I certainly heard my right hon. Friend robustly affirm his views about the undesirability of single-sex wards.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): Could my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary be asked whether copies of the United Nations charter on human rights, which celebrates its 50th anniversary today, could be distributed by the British embassy in Chile to anti-British and unruly elements who are demonstrating? Perhaps that would explain to them the decision made yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary.

Mrs. Beckett: That is a most interesting suggestion, and I shall bring it to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary, who will, I am sure, be most grateful for it.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): The right hon. Lady's statement on the provisional business for the first week of next year contained no reference to the Bill on the national health service. Would she confirm that the Government's pledge to wind up fundholding by 31 March would require that Bill to pass into law before that date? Does the absence of the Bill from the provisional business for the first week of next year imply that the Government have finally abandoned the attempt to keep the pledge of abolishing fundholding by 31 March?

Mrs. Beckett: The Gracious Speech referred to a Bill to reform the health service, and a Bill will be brought forward. I cannot immediately recall the issues relating to a specific deadline, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government clearly believe that we must dispense with the bureaucracy and waste that fundholding brought. We intend to ensure that doctors have the freedom to prescribe high-quality health care for their patients.

Mr. Peter Bradley (The Wrekin): My right hon. Friend will be aware that the local government ombudsman yesterday published a damning finding against Westminster city council. He found that the council had subjected vulnerable homeless families to unspeakable living conditions in the Clarendon Court hotel in Maida Vale, while paying £750,000 of taxpayers' money in housing benefits to the proprietors of that dubious establishment. Will my right hon. Friend join me in commending my hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) for exposing that scandal and putting an end to it?

Does my right hon. Friend recall the instruction given by Conservative leaders of Westminster city council to officers to be mean and nasty to the homeless, shortly before families were forced into asbestos-riddled tower blocks not five miles from here? Does she also recall that not one right hon. or hon. Member from the Conservative Benches has so far uttered a syllable of regret or remorse for, or condemnation of, the doings of their colleagues at Westminster city hall?

Does my right hon. Friend share my sense of outrage at the fact that every local authority in the country is subject to a levy that the Audit Commission has been forced to impose to help it to meet the legal costs of contesting the appeal of Dame Shirley Porter and David Weeks against surcharge? Would it be appropriate to find time in our schedule for a debate on the appalling affairs of the flagship Tory authority, which would at least offer Conservative Members one last chance to express some remorse or regret?

Mrs. Beckett: I share my hon. Friend's views. Labour has every right to be proud of those colleagues who, as councillors at Westminster, did so much to expose what was happening to people and to bring to a close the appalling situation whereby people were made to live in such dreadful properties. I well recall that my hon. Friend drew his concerns about the matter to my attention during the general election campaign.

I share my hon. Friend's sadness at the knock-on effects of the problems raised by the cases brought against Dame Shirley Porter and others. We believed the behaviour of Westminster city council, quite aside from its dreadful human consequences, to be illegal—as has since been proved. Whenever it was raised in the House—time and time again—during the previous Parliament, we heard repeated assertions from members of the party then in government that, if any wrongdoing were proven, they would certainly condemn it. To this day, those Members have not done so. Some of my hon. Friends wrote on the matter almost a year ago to the Leader of the Opposition and to the former Secretary of State for the Environment, the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer), but they have not elicited any reply.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): Is the right hon. Lady aware that the United Nations weapons inspectors were yesterday obstructed in the course of their business? Is she further aware that not only Christmas but Ramadan is approaching, and that the opportunity exists for Saddam Hussein to make a good deal of trouble with which it would be extremely difficult to deal? Will the right hon. Lady give some consideration to asking the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary to make a statement about the situation in Iraq before the House rises? If that is not possible, will she let me know what possible

[Mr. Nicholas Soames]

contingency plans could be in place, because, if the obstruction continues, it will clearly be necessary for the allies to take appropriate action?

Mrs. Beckett: I am indeed aware of the approach of Ramadan, as my constituency celebrates everything from Diwali to Ramadan and, indeed, Vaisakhi. I understand the hon. Gentleman's concerns. I am not in a position to say whether it would be right or necessary for the Prime Minister or the Foreign Secretary to make a statement before the House rises. We all hope that the pressure on the Iraqi Government will cause them to rethink. I can say, however, that the Government have, as I am sure the hon. Gentleman accepts, taken pains to try to keep the House informed throughout, and will continue to do so.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): May we have an early debate on press freedom and the availability of media in our regions? The Lord President may be aware that the *Rotherham Star*, the local evening paper that serves some quarter of a million people in and around my constituency, faces closure because of a decision by Regional Independent Media, a Leeds-based company that publishes the *Yorkshire Evening Post* and a number of evening papers in Yorkshire and the north-west of England.

The managing director of that organisation, or chief executive as such people are now called, has issued dismissal notices to up to 350 employees, despite the fact that the paper is bringing in record profits and advertising revenue for the group, and plans to invest £6.5 million next year. If the *Rotherham Star*, my local evening paper, is closed, there will be no local evening daily for a quarter of a million people. That is bad for democracy and for local politics.

Is my right hon. Friend further aware that such action comes close to contempt for the House of Commons—

Madam Speaker: Order.

Mr. MacShane: I am coming to a close, I promise.

In a memorandum dated 19 August 1998, the chief executive warned that these mass redundancies were designed to avoid legislation that was in the pipeline. That should concern us all. Three hundred and fifty people will lose their jobs, and their families will have a miserable Christmas because of legislation passed by representatives of the people of this country, but this is also an important issue in terms of media democracy in our regions and the contempt shown for the democratic process of the House of Commons.

Mrs. Beckett: I am certainly sorry to learn that my hon. Friend's constituents are in danger of losing access to a local paper and, like the whole House, I am also sorry to learn that many people are about to lose their employment. This is a particularly sensitive time of year for people to find themselves in such circumstances.

I have slightly mixed feelings about the second part of the concerns aired by my hon. Friend. I certainly share his view that it is right and proper for the House to consider and, if it wishes to do so, to pass legislation that we believe will improve the governance and condition of our country, and that it is wrong for people to attempt to evade such democratically arrived at decisions. Equally, however, I feel a certain cynicism when I hear people claim that solely as a result of something that any Government—but especially this one—have done, they have been obliged to lay off considerable numbers of people.

I have never forgotten that, shortly before the 1992 general election, an announcement was made by a fairly major employer that, should a Labour Government be elected and introduce a national minimum wage, it would be forced to make several hundred of its employees redundant. We were not elected and there was no minimum wage, but that employer made 2,000 people redundant about three weeks after the election.

Mr. Andrew Stunell (Hazel Grove): May I draw the attention of the Leader of the House to early-day motion 59?

[That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that the Income Support (General) (Standard Interest Rate Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 1998 (S.I., 1998 No. 2878), dated 23rd November 1998, a copy of which was laid before this House on 27th November, be annulled.]

Will the right hon. Lady find time for a debate in the appropriate Committee on this very important statutory instrument, to allow investigation of the anomalies and difficulties that are raised by social security regulations in the support and help of those who are on low incomes and live in owner-occupied residences? The problems for those with mortgages and mortgage interest rate payments, which they have to face, are baffling and bewildering even to the experts, never mind those who are subject to them. Will the right hon. Lady find time for the statutory instrument to be debated, in accordance with the wishes of many hon. Members?

Mrs. Beckett: I sympathise with those who find social security issues, and regulations especially, arcane and difficult. I was fortunate enough, if I can put it like that, to spend five years shadowing Social Security Ministers, so I am under no illusions about the complexity and opaqueness of such matters. I am conscious that very often what happens is the net knock-on effect of a range of different decisions, which people find difficult to assess and understand.

I sympathise with the concern expressed by the hon. Gentleman and by those who have signed his early-day motion. However, I fear that I cannot undertake to provide time for a specialist debate. I remind the hon. Gentleman that there will be a debate on the Christmas Adjournment. For those who are fortunate enough to catch your eye, Madam Speaker, any such issue can be raised.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): My right hon. Friend will know that there remain real concerns about progress on the third-country trial of those responsible for the Lockerbie air disaster. Is there to be any statement or further information on the progress that is being made this side of the Christmas recess? Are there any plans for senior Ministers to meet families of the Lockerbie victims to discuss that progress?

Mrs. Beckett: As far as I am aware, there are no particular plans, although the Government continue to

discuss and express concern about these matters, for a statement in the House. However, I can say to my hon. Friend—I hope that this will be welcome to him and other hon. Members who have taken a great interest in these matters—that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister is meeting this afternoon, or has met, the families of some of the Lockerbie victims. I think that I am correct in saying that he is the first Prime Minister to do so. It is a deliberate signal, and an indication of the Government's concern and of our determination to do everything that we can to bring those who may be thought to be responsible to trial so that these matters can be assessed.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): In welcoming the promise of a statement on the outcome of the Vienna Council, may I bring the Leader of the House back to the assurance that she thought she had given last week, but had not because it was given on the wrong premise? Will she consider a debate in Government time on common foreign and security policy? Will she urge the Prime Minister to contribute to that debate? We did not have statements following Portschach and St. Malo. The Prime Minister has been saying some interesting things about the development of common foreign and security policy and the only people who have not had a chance to debate it are Members of this place. Will the right hon. Lady find time for us to do so?

Mrs. Beckett: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, that is not entirely accurate. It is only quite recently that we had a full day's debate on foreign and defence affairs, in the debate on the Gracious Speech. Everything that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has been saying and the point of view that he has been expressing in the discussions to which the hon. Gentleman has referred are very much in line with the views that he has expressed and made plain in the House. I therefore cannot promise to find time for another debate on the Floor of the House in the near future, although the hon. Gentleman may seek to raise the matter, should he catch your eye, Madam Speaker, during the debate on the Christmas Adjournment.

May I add that the Government have recently accepted the report of the Select Committee on Modernisation with regard to scrutiny of European Union legislation, so that all the issues that come under those pillars of policy making can be much more fully scrutinised in the House than used to be the case.

BILL PRESENTED

Tax Credits

Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, supported by Mr. Secretary Darling, Mr. Stephen Byers, Mr. Geoffrey Robinson, Dawn Primarolo and Ms Patricia Hewitt, presented a Bill to provide for family credit and disability working allowance to be known, respectively, as working families tax credit and disabled person's tax credit; and to make further provision with respect to those credits, including provision for the transfer of functions relating to them: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 9].

ESTIMATES DAY

[1st Allotted Day]

VOTE ON ACCOUNT 1999–2000

Class IV, Vote 1

Prison Sentences

[Relevant documents: Third Report from the Home Affairs Committee of Session 1997–98, on Alternatives to Prison Sentences, HC486, and the Government's response thereto, Cm 4174; and the Home Office Departmental Annual Report 1998, Cm 3908.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That a sum, not exceeding £2,299,414,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2000 for expenditure by the Home Office on police; the Forensic Science Service; registration of forensic practitioners; emergency planning; fire services; the Fire Service College; criminal policy and programmes including offender programmes; the prevention of drug abuse; crime reduction and prevention; provision of services relating to the Crime and Disorder Act; criminal justice service research; criminal injuries compensation; organised and international crime; control of immigration and nationality; issue of passports; community and constitutional services; firearms compensation and related matters; and on administration (excluding the provision for prisons administration carried on Class IV, Vote 2).—*[Mr. Boateng.]*

4.51 pm

Mr. Chris Mullin (Sunderland, South): The interest of the Select Committee on Home Affairs in alternatives to prison arose from the single stark fact that, when we commenced our inquiry, the prison population appeared to be escalating out of control. It had risen from 43,000 in March 1993 to 65,000 in March this year, and was at that time predicted to rise to more than 80,000 in the next seven years.

A point had been reached when much of the undoubted progress of the past 20 years—in terms of providing constructive regimes, ending three to a cell and detaining convicted prisoners in police stations—was in jeopardy. We were moving back towards regimes that simply warehoused prisoners, rather than making any serious attempt to rehabilitate them or persuade them to confront their offending behaviour. Those in charge of the Prison Service were telling anyone who cared to listen that, if the prison population continued to rise at that rate, serious problems lay ahead.

So great was the concern among serious people that there came a moment during a debate in the House of Lords when three former Conservative Home Secretaries—the noble Lords Carr, Baker and Hurd, none of whom can be dismissed as a namby-pamby do-gooder—combined to challenge the then accepted wisdom that prison works. We took our cue from them.

For the avoidance of doubt, I must make it clear from the outset that none of us on the Select Committee is under any illusion about the need for prisons. All of us have constituents whose lives have been made miserable by crime. Some of us, particularly those who represent the less leafy areas of the country, have entire neighbourhoods devastated by criminal activity. We recognise that there are people—persistent criminals and those who engage in serious violence—for whom prison is the only appropriate solution. Nothing in our report is intended to suggest otherwise. I cannot stress that too strongly.

It would be foolish, however, not to recognise that the "prison works" philosophy has serious limitations. First, it is expensive. It costs an average of £24,000 a year to detain an adult prisoner, and double that to imprison a juvenile. It is arguable that the same amount of money invested differently could, in some cases, be spent a great deal more effectively to reduce reoffending among at least some of those now imprisoned.

Secondly, although prison self-evidently works as a form of containment, there is the difficulty that the overwhelming majority of prisoners will eventually be released back into the community, where a disappointingly high number of them simply pick up where they left off.

The point was eloquently made by the noble Lord Baker in the debate in the House of Lords to which I referred:

"It was a mistake of the previous government to believe that just one phrase—'prison works'—was necessary. The phrase has a spurious and superficial logic. It is superficial because if a criminal is in prison, clearly he cannot be committing crime outside. It is spurious because it does not take into account . . . the fact that 99.9 per cent. of all criminals will one day be released. Society will then find that prisons do not work."—[*Official Report, House of Lords*, 25 March 1998; Vol. 587, c. 1244.]

If we are to stand any chance of reforming those whom it is necessary to imprison, it is essential that we construct regimes where prisoners are obliged to confront their offending behaviour, and that we do not simply use our prisons as warehouses. That cannot be done if the efforts of the Prison Service to provide constructive regimes are simply overwhelmed by the need to cope with ever-increasing numbers.

That was the background to our inquiry. Our purpose was to discover whether credible alternatives to imprisonment existed that were both sufficiently rigorous and at least as successful—and preferably more—in rehabilitating offenders.

Those from whom we took evidence included representatives of the Prison Service, the police and the probation service. We saw the Lord Chief Justice, the Magistrates Association, Her Majesty's chief inspector of prisons and the inspectorate of probation as well as representatives of voluntary agencies that work with offenders, in and out of prison.

I was anxious that those who take the view that prison works should be given an opportunity to state their case. We therefore took written and oral evidence from Mr. Peter Coad and Mr. David Fraser, retired senior probation officers, and Professor Ken Pease, a criminologist. In addition, we visited a variety of probation and other projects around the country in search of examples of best practice that we could commend. We visited projects in Manchester, Greenock, Dumbarton, Bolton, Burnley, Tyneside, Teesside, Blackburn, London and the Thames valley.

With two exceptions, all those witnesses who expressed a view argued that the present prison population was too large and that ways should be found of reducing it. The exceptions were the Police Superintendents Association and Mr. Peter Coad and his colleagues. They argued that the fall in crime in recent years could be ascribed wholly or mainly to increased use of imprisonment.

Mr. Coad and his colleagues went further, and argued that the reoffending rates for most, if not all, of those on probation or serving a community service order were as bad as or worse than the rates for those who had served a prison sentence. They alleged that the probation service had for many years misled Parliament and the public about the effectiveness of their work, and advocated an increase in the prison population to whatever level was necessary to protect the public from criminality. Mr. Coad and Mr. Fraser told us that that would entail a prison population of 200,000, "to begin with".

Professor Pease, sensing perhaps that Mr. Coad had been a little too frank, hastily suggested a further increase of no more than 10,000—a figure which on present trends will soon be exceeded. At that point, I felt—I believe that I speak for the entire Committee—that their evidence fell apart. We unanimously rejected the suggestion that a prison population of 200,000—three times the existing record level—was either feasible or desirable.

Although prison has some impact, I do not accept that the recent fall in crime can be solely, or even mainly, attributed to the rise in the prison population. There are a variety of factors. One is a general improvement in the quality of policing, which is certainly the case in Sunderland. Another, and surely the most significant, is the fact that unemployment has fallen by 40 per cent. over the past five years.

With the possible exception of the previous Home Secretary, I do not know anyone who believes that there is no connection between unemployment and crime, although that is obviously not the only connection. Hon. Members who represent areas such as mine and those represented by many of my right hon. and hon. Friends would have had to drop off a Christmas tree from a great height not to notice a connection between unemployment and crime.

Having said that, there is a significant respect in which the Committee found itself in agreement with the analysis of Mr. Coad and his colleagues. There is no doubt—Her Majesty's inspector of probation acknowledged this—that the probation service went through a period some years ago when many probation officers came to regard the offender, not the taxpayer, as their client. I am glad that those days are behind us, but I cannot stress too strongly that, if a sceptical public are to be convinced that there are credible alternatives to imprisonment, they will also need to be persuaded that those who supervise offenders in the community have their interests—not those of the offender—in the forefront of their minds.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I am grateful to the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee for giving way on that matter. Mr. Peter Coad indeed made the case that, given the number of offences that had been committed, 200,000 people should be locked up. I had some sympathy with some of the points that he was making. However, in the Government's response to our report, which was published this week, the Home Secretary said:

> "It is for the courts to decide the appropriate sentence in any individual case . . . The Prison Service then has a duty to keep in custody those sentenced to prison."

If the courts decide that a custodial sentence is required, and that 200,000 people fit that bill, will the Prison Service not have to provide those places?

Mr. Mullin: Yes. The burden of our report, to which the hon. Gentleman subscribes—it was approved unanimously—is that there are, if we look for them, credible and effective alternatives to imprisonment, and that, if sentencers look for them, they too might find such alternatives. I entirely accept, however, that, if someone has committed a crime that merits a prison sentence and for which there is no effective and credible alternative, to prison he must go.

The hon. Gentleman will have heard me say a moment ago that there was one significant respect in which the Committee found itself in agreement with Mr. Coad's analysis: it is the point that I made a moment ago about the past role of the probation service.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): When we were going around the country and talking to sentencers, it soon became obvious that very few of them had sufficient knowledge of the alternatives to prison—even of schemes in their areas that have turned people away from reoffending and shown them how their lives could be worth while. That shows that, where there is knowledge and belief, the schemes are extremely valuable. We are not talking about allowing people to walk away from the court because they are not sent to prison.

Mr. Mullin: My hon. Friend is right. One of the problems is that none of us is sufficiently aware of the alternatives. In the past, some of the alternatives were not sufficiently rigorous to justify their being called alternatives. Happily, that is now beginning to change. I accept that a precondition of reducing the prison population is that there must be credible alternatives. It is not sufficient for those who favour a reduction in the use of imprisonment simply to assert that community service and other alternatives are at least as, or more, effective. That must be shown by reference to empirical evidence.

The Committee was surprised to discover that, of the 267 projects examined by the probation inspectorate as part of its "what works" project—an important piece of work—only 33 could provide serious evidence of the outcomes. That is not necessarily a criticism of the type of programme, but if one wants to sell that programme, however good it may be, and the outcome cannot be demonstrated, the programme deserves criticism. Of the 33 projects that could provide evidence of the outcome, in only four cases did the research demonstrate credible examples of good practice.

We welcome the fact that the probation service now recognises that problem, and is taking steps to deal with it. However, if community service is to be promoted as a credible alternative to imprisonment—I believe that in many cases it is—it must be supported by hard evidence, not by assertion.

Mr. Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West): There is one point on which I have seen no research. Obviously, it is possible to look at whether a disposal other than imprisonment has a better outcome for a certain group, but in respect of people on the margin of being sent to prison, is there much evidence to show whether being sent to prison has such an outcome? The alternative does not necessarily have to be probation or community service; simply sending such people to prison may be worse than not sending them to prison.

Mr. Mullin: I am not entirely sure that I understand the hon. Gentleman's point—I am sure that it is my fault rather than his. It may help him if I deal with some of the specific areas that the Committee examined.

[Mr. Mullin]

We looked at a pilot project on electronic tagging, which has been operating in Manchester since 1995. Similar experiments are under way in other parts of the country. Although there were some initial teething troubles, we were glad to note that those appeared to have been overcome and that tagging was likely to come into general use next year.

Curfew orders enforced by electronic monitoring could have two applications. First, they could be used as a sentence available to the courts for someone who would otherwise be sent to prison, and could be combined with a probation or a community service order. Secondly, a home detention curfew order could be used as a condition of parole for shorter-term prisoners. It has been estimated—indeed, I believe that it is the Government's intention—that that could free 3,000 prison places a year in the medium term.

The key to the success of electronic tagging is enforcement. The technology enables the slightest breach to be registered. When a serious breach occurs, it is important that the offender understands that consequences will follow swiftly. In most cases, the logical consequence of a serious failure to comply with a curfew order is imprisonment. We shall watch with interest the rigour with which curfew orders are enforced.

We examined programmes of intensive probation. Of particular interest was the model based on the so-called Dordrecht initiative, which we visited in Burnley. That programme concentrated on the 100 or so most persistent offenders in the town. Many of them had served repeated terms of imprisonment, which had had no impact on their offending behaviour. To qualify for a place on the programme, each offender had to show a serious intent to reform. The programme offered them help to reconstruct often chaotic life styles by providing access to drug or alcohol rehabilitation, education, training and, one hopes, in due course, work.

We were impressed by the dedication of those running the programme, one of whom was a police officer. He told me that it was a pleasure to be involved in the project, because, instead of locking up the same old people time after time, it held out the prospect of addressing the roots of the problem. He found the work very satisfying, and we were impressed with him and his colleagues. At the time of our visit, it was too early to evaluate the programme, but we believe that it has every chance of success.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): I am a member of the Select Committee. Does my hon. Friend agree that the visits we made and the documentary evidence we received made us aware of the persistent anti-social behaviour of many people on probation? In the past, some aspects of the probation service have been criticised. I have not done so, because I worked with the service for two weeks in 1973 and I recognise the tremendous difficulties that probation staff face when dealing with people with a history of anti-social behaviour, who have often been in and out of prison. It is not an easy job, and I imagine that no one in the House would want to undertake probation work.

Mr. Mullin: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. I take it as read that those who work with offenders often have to deal with extremely difficult customers, so we should not be surprised if there are some failures. We must acknowledge the dedication of people who work with offenders. We saw some impressive work in the many projects that we visited around the country.

We examined the extent to which probation and community service orders are enforced. The first thing to be said is that the available statistics in this area are inadequate. According to Home Office research, about 70 per cent. of such orders are successfully completed. It is far from clear what happens to those who fail to turn up. We were told that it can take between three weeks and two months to return to court an offender in breach of an order, and that the police do not attach high priority to tracking down those who fail to respond to court orders.

It goes without saying that the credibility of community service and probation orders is fatally undermined if those who decline to co-operate go unpunished. The Committee recommended that an experiment should be conducted to see whether civil enforcement agencies could be used more effectively. I welcome the Government's response that, as soon as an opportunity arises, legislation will be introduced to give effect to that recommendation.

Several members of the judiciary remarked to us that they regretted the recent restrictions on the use of the suspended sentence, which they regarded as one of the more effective tools in their armoury. I am glad to note from the Government's response to our report that Ministers are considering the use of suspended sentences, in conjunction with community service orders.

Our report should not be seen in isolation; it should be seen merely as a further step along the road to a criminal justice system that is more effective in protecting the public and reducing criminality. In particular, it should be seen alongside the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, which has greatly increased the number of options available to the police and the courts when they deal with youth crime. Until the Act, our criminal justice system had become virtually ineffective against young criminals, and that, more than any other factor, has undermined public confidence in non-custodial sentences. I welcome all that the Government have done so far to speed up youth justice and render it more effective: I know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary takes the issue seriously.

There is another issue, however, which we have hardly begun to tackle. It requires co-ordinated action by several Departments, not just the Home Office. I refer to diversion: diverting vulnerable young people away from criminal activity. When the former permanent secretary at the Home Office appeared before the Select Committee a few years ago—he has now gone on to more exalted things, if it is possible to become more exalted than permanent secretary at the Home Office—I asked him how much of the Home Office budget was spent on diversion. It became clear through our exchanges that he did not know what I was talking about; but the following year, when he returned, there was a paragraph in the Home Office annual report headed "Diversion". We make progress, but slowly.

At present, we spend far too much on locking people up after they have become criminals, and not nearly enough on diverting vulnerable young people from criminal life styles. The expenditure of relatively small sums could prevent us from having to spend much larger sums further down the line. During our inquiry, we visited

a project called "Youth Works" in Blackburn, the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. We were told that the project cost about £180,000 a year to run, and that it provided a large number of vulnerable young people—who would otherwise be hanging around the streets in a high-crime area with nothing to do—with constructive activities outside school hours.

On the Pennywell estate in my constituency, there is a scheme called "Break-out", which helps to occupy nearly 700 vulnerable youngsters. It costs about £60,000 a year, the cost of locking up one juvenile for 18 months. The moral of the story is obvious, yet most of the money has to be begged, and those who run such excellent schemes rarely know where their funds will come from more than a few months in advance.

Miss Melanie Johnson (Welwyn Hatfield): Does my hon. Friend agree that the work of the social exclusion unit may become particularly relevant to the problems that he is raising? I am thinking especially of children who are even younger than those of whom he is speaking. The all-party parenting group was recently given a presentation by the head of a unit for teenage mothers, which has a nursery unit for the women's young children attached to it. She said that she already felt certain that some of those children were tomorrow's criminals. In trying to divert people from a criminal life style, we need to consider the whole age span.

Mr. Mullin: I subscribe to all that my hon. Friend has said. The earlier we start, the better are our chances of diverting young people from a life that could lead to crime. In that context, I am worried by the trend towards excluding more children from school. Unless we get to grips with the problem, we shall build up great difficulties for the future.

As I have said, our report should not be seen in isolation. It should be seen alongside the Crime and Disorder Act, and the Government's literacy and numeracy programme. All that is relevant to our attempts to build a cohesive society, and to reverse the awful trends that have set in over the past 20 or 30 years.

I return to diversion, although I shall not dwell on the subject; strictly speaking, it is a matter for another inquiry on another day. I just say that, if we are serious about tackling the causes of crime as well as the symptoms, much more attention must be paid to helping to divert vulnerable young people before they become criminals, rather than picking up the pieces after it is too late.

As I have said, the report is unanimous. I hope that it marks the formal end of the "prison works" philosophy; indeed, it probably died on the day in March this year when those three former Conservative Home Secretaries repudiated it in the House of Lords. However, I accept that the burden of proving that our prison population is too high lies with those who want to reduce it.

The public are entitled to expect that non-custodial sentences are sufficiently robust to leave offenders in no doubt about the seriousness of their offending, and to reduce the possibility of repetition. Everyone from the Home Secretary and Lord Chief Justice downwards has a part to play in that.

The probation service must never lose sight of the fact that it represents the public, not the offender. Judges and magistrates must, for their part, show a greater willingness, where appropriate, to pass non-custodial sentences and to acquaint themselves with the range of possibilities that are on offer. The media, too, have an important role to play.

Every week in my local newspaper, one reads stories that so-and-so "walked free" from court with "only" 200 hours of community service. Two hundred hours of community service could, if it were sufficiently rigorous, be much more beneficial than a six-month prison sentence.

Finally, all responsible politicians should help to prepare public opinion for a reduction in the prison population by calmly drawing attention to the consequences of continuing to fill our prisons to bursting point and to the existence of credible and effective alternatives. I commend the report to the House.

5.17 pm

Mr. Humfrey Malins (Woking): As always, I begin by declaring an interest as a recorder of the Crown court and as an acting metropolitan stipendiary magistrate.

It was a privilege to be on the Select Committee and to take part in the publication of the report. One of the pleasures of being on a Select Committee is that one operates in what is effectively a non-party political way, discussing, in this case, a difficult, serious and important subject without anyone having to score political points but with members doing their best to put in their few pennyworth. The subject of the report is, indeed, a difficult subject: we have been a civilised country for hundreds of years, yet the crime rate keeps going up, and the debate about whether custody stops people committing crime will go on and on.

Not one of us on the Select Committee or in the House has all the answers, and it is difficult to find anyone who really knows exactly what to do when it comes to the twin duties of protecting society and promoting the welfare of the offender—if one can do that, because it is an almost possible task.

I pause to say, in passing, that we all acknowledge that, in the last five years of the last Conservative Government, crime fell dramatically. The then Home Secretary, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), rightly received much congratulation on that. However, the prison population went up. Who in their right mind believes that a very high prison population is, of itself, a good thing? I do not, but who would say that courts must sentence people to community service and other penalties if they believe that prisons are getting too full? The right punishment must be imposed in every case, so there are competing factors. As I say, it is extremely difficult to reach any solid conclusions.

The Committee took evidence from people who said that probation works, because the reoffending rate of those on probation is lower than that of those coming out of prison. I am not sure that any statistic can ever establish that fact to one's certain satisfaction, because statistics do not tell the full truth. The short answer—it must be right—is that a prison sentence will work much better with some offenders than with others. Equally, a community penalty or a probation order will be highly effective with some offenders. It depends on the individual case.

I should like to dwell on four different nuts-and-bolts issues, and to bring them to the Minister's attention. The Minister has had a distinguished career at the Bar

[Mr. Humfrey Malins]

and—I know for a fact—takes a great interest in the subject. I am sure that he will be concerned about and interested in today's debate.

The first issue is community sentences, especially community service orders. Although the public have the misconception that community service orders are not tough, they can be very tough indeed. The missing element in such sentences is enforceability and proceedings on breach. From my experience I can tell the Minister that, quite often, people come before the court for breach of a community service order simply because they have not turned up—they have overslept, not felt like it or not bothered. What can the court do? Magistrates courts have a problem.

Technically, magistrates courts can imprison if the offence for which the community service order was passed was imprisonable; but that does not often happen. Quite often, the original offence was deemed not so serious that only a custodial sentence could be justified, but serious enough to warrant a community penalty. Magistrates generally are quite reluctant to exercise even their limited power to imprison. The court is then left to tackle someone who has breached a community service order with a fine or another community service order. The subsequent impression is that the offender has walked out of court without having faced the music, and that is a problem. The situation is even worse if the original offence was not imprisonable, because then breach of a community service order cannot result in the passing of a custodial sentence.

What is to be done? The Committee's report urges the Government to toughen up the provisions: to get those who are breaching community service orders into court more quickly—that is terribly important—and, once they are there, to have truly effective sanctions. In that regard, there is a very strong argument for the Government's considering introducing a new offence—breach of a community service order—for which one goes to prison.

I should tell the Minister that, when a United Kingdom court disqualifies someone from driving, that person is told: "You are disqualified from driving. If you breach that disqualification, you will be charged with it, and you will almost certainly go to prison." How good it would be to be able to say that when passing a community service order. I hope that we will get to that stage.

The second issue that I wish to raise is that of suspended sentences. Those who have the responsibility of passing suspended sentences have felt that such sentences are an extremely useful tool. In 1991, 28,000 suspended prison sentences were passed. However, subsequent legislation made it very difficult to pass such sentences, which could be used only in exceptional circumstances. The Court of Appeal has said that the "exceptional circumstances" are very narrow indeed. For my part, I cannot remember passing one suspended sentence in the past two years, because I could not think of any circumstances that were exceptional. However, I should have liked to do so on a number of occasions.

Among those giving evidence to the Committee were Mr. Allan Berg, a stipendiary magistrate from Manchester; Mr. Tim Workman, a stipendiary from London; and others, including court clerks and members of the lay bench. They all felt that suspended sentences were a really useful tool in a sentencer's armoury.

When should a suspended sentence be imposed? The Minister may say that it would not be easy to specify criteria in statute or to alter the current criteria, and I appreciate that. Equally, he may say that it would be allowing sentencers too wide a discretion to suspend a sentence when they felt it appropriate to do so. If there is confidence in our sentences, there is a good argument for bringing back the suspended sentence. It keeps out of prison some people who do not have to go there; it enables the court to take into account certain important factors; and it can be a tough threat hanging over someone's head.

Miss Melanie Johnson: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that suspended sentences may be an effective tool to prevent the problem of fine defaulters serving prison sentences, which is covered in the report?

Mr. Malins: I was coming to that. The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. Leaving a threat hanging over someone's head can be good, and could be more widely used for fine defaulters. The hon. Lady was not on the Select Committee at the time of our report, but she has made some good contributions since becoming a member. She is a welcome addition and is welcome in the Chamber today.

I shall be slightly controversial on the important subject of fines. The report talks about the problem of collecting fines, which is clearly not well done. Huge amounts are outstanding. For those who sit in the magistrates court, the pain of the week—it happens at least once a week—is sitting in the means court going through the outstanding fines to see what can be done. Sometimes it is easiest to remit the lot and go home early.

We have got ourselves into a mess on the procedure for collecting fines in our courts. Only three or four years ago, the person on the bench in such a case could say within seconds, "I believe this is culpable neglect or wilful refusal. Go to prison." It was common to say to a fine defaulter, "You owe £50. How much money do you have on you?" "Not a thing," would come the reply. "Very well," the sentencer would say, "How are you going to pay the £50?" "I'll pay a pound a week," the defaulter would reply. "That's not very good," the sentencer would say. "I'm thinking of sending you to prison for quite a long time. I'll tell you what. I've got a very busy morning. You can go down to the cells and I'll consider the case this afternoon and consider the nature of the sentence. Take him down to the cells, gaoler; do allow him two phone calls." The money would arrive by lunch time.

The courts have made a rod for their own back, because as the Minister knows, the sentencers can no longer approach the issue in that fashion. They have to go through the various possibilities. Issuing a distress warrant is ineffective. A deduction from income support is cumbersome and expensive, and the paperwork is complicated. As for a monetary payment supervision order, one can barely spell it, let alone decide how to work it. An attachment of earnings order? Well, who is earning anything in the court? Certainly not the stipendiaries sitting. Other possibilities include making an attendance centre order if the defaulter is under 25 or taking enforcement action in the High court.

Before prison can be considered, the whole checklist has to be gone through and reasons given why none of the measures is effective. No wonder those who handle the means courts scratch their heads and think, "Mmm. This isn't working very well."

It is important that fines should be at a sensible level. A young man in London needs his wheels to get around the city. A lot of young men have cars. The value may be £150 at most, but they need their wheels. I understand that. It is important and fair. By all means they should get the car insured, because if they do not they are in big trouble. However, the magistrates' guidelines tend to suggest that the fine for non-insurance of a motor car should be £400 to £700. I am afraid that too many benches—I exempt the stipendiaries—impose fines of £500, £600 or £700 for non-insurance on people who are on benefit and have not got a bean. That is hopeless.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): I hesitate to interrupt my hon. Friend's extremely effective and interesting speech, but is not driving a car without insurance one of the most anti-social criminal offences? Crashing into someone in a car that is not insured has terrible consequences, and the courts are right to visit heavy penalties on those who misbehave in that way.

Mr. Malins: My hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right and he has great experience of these matters—*[Interruption]*—not of driving uninsured—far from it—but in the courts. Driving uninsured is a serious offence.

Many young people need their cars. They own bangers worth £200 or £300 and it is vital that they have insurance. However, it is ludicrous to fine them £600 that they do not have. In my view they should be fined £100 and disqualified from driving for a good long time. They should be banned for six to nine months and sentenced to community service. We should take driving uninsured seriously, but we must not overload the fine system. That would avoid the terrible problems involved in collection. I hope that the courts will bear that in mind.

I have covered suspended sentences, fines and enforcement of community service. As everyone who spoke to the Committee said, drugs are the biggest problem in the criminal justice system. I have heard such cases day after day, involving, for example, a young man of 25 who burgles and steals to raise money to fund his heroin habit and for no other reason. These young people—they are generally men—have had it by the age of 25. Their lives are ruined. There seems to be nothing that one can do—or is there? I give the Government credit for being well-intentioned in respect of drug treatment and testing orders, but I am not sure that they go far enough. We shall have to keep a careful eye on the matter.

An awful lot of young people who are on drugs may say, "I would like to get off them, but I just can't do it." They may have tried two or three times, but they cannot stop themselves. What is to be done? Someone in that position may have a drug treatment and testing order made against them. That is a community order under the Criminal Justice Act 1991 requiring someone to submit to treatment in such institution as may be specified.

Mr. Gerald Howarth: Is that mandatory even if the offender is not in agreement with the treatment order?

Mr. Malins: I do not think so. I think that there has to be an element of consent. No doubt I shall be corrected by the Minister. Under a drug treatment and testing order, the court says that the defendant must go and be treated.

Let us pause a moment here. I am not quite so worried about the person before the magistrates court, or possibly the Crown court, who is dabbling in drugs and sometimes causes problems. A drug treatment and testing order may be very good for such a person. I am more worried by the hard man of 25 who is a burglar. He burgles people's houses at midnight. He has committed a serious offence that requires custody. He is part of a gang of four and has carried out a heavy domestic burglary at midnight. It may be his fifth such burglary in the past six years, six months or even five days.

It is difficult to impose a drug testing order on a hardened criminal. Where should he be sent? I would not be happy to send him to a probation hostel, as it is not secure enough. What about hospital? Can anyone tell me where he should go? There is nowhere. The problem is where to put a heavy criminal to ensure that he is absolutely secure.

In our deliberations on the Crime and Disorder Bill, as it then was, I floated a new clause in an attempt to solve that problem. The measure would have put heavy drug takers in a drug-free secure prison—almost like a hospital—in which they could be treated. It would have been like saying: "Defendant, you have an option. You can do five years in Wormwood Scrubs for this domestic burglary or you can do 18 months' hard in the drug rehabilitation centre, which is like a prison and from which you can't get out." The idea did not get far, but I was flagging up the problem of people who are into drugs and are so dangerous that they cannot easily be given a non-custodial sentence. The Home Affairs Committee was united in the view that drugs were the big issue affecting us all in the criminal justice world.

It was a privilege to sit on the Committee. Many people are doing their best, but there are no straightforward answers. All members were impressed by some of the projects we saw. We came to the conclusion that diversion was good, and that some of the projects might be effective. We emerged knowing that prison would always be essential for many criminals, but we were given some hope by the fact that innovation and energy were being well directed to young people, who face much greater problems than we ever did. If such innovation, energy, interest and diversion are promoted hard, we will move—albeit slowly—down the right road.

5.37 pm

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): The most haunting statement in the Home Affairs Committee's marvellous report—I ask members of the Committee to forgive me for not concentrating on the main thrust of their valuable recommendations, which I hope will be implemented—comes from the evidence of the chief inspector of prisons, who said that 70 per cent. of women prisoners should not be in prison. He gave the example of a woman who was sent to prison for three years for misbehaving in Trafalgar square—a minor offence.

There is evidence of an enormous drugs problem in women's prisons. Although we do not have a system of capital punishment, two women died this year as a direct result, I believe, of their experiences in prison. Their relatives are happy for me to give their names: one was Josie O'Dwyer and the other was Emma Humphreys.

The enormous drugs problem in prisons has entirely unexpected effects. In a letter dated 22 October, Lord Williams of Mostyn, the Minister with responsibility for

[Mr. Paul Flynn]

prisons, told me that the National Addiction Centre had found, in the only serious attempt to discover the effects of the mandatory drug testing system, that

"Four per cent. of their sample of drug misusers had experimented with heroin for the first time because of MDT".

That is a rather surprising conclusion. We know from anecdotal evidence—not from prison governors but from prisoners themselves—that, because of the mandatory drug test, there is a move from soft, relatively harmless, non-addictive illegal drugs to deadly, addictive drugs.

Mr. Corbett: In prison.

Mr. Flynn: Yes, in prison.

The two unfortunate women, Josie O'Dwyer and Emma Humphreys, died as a result not of illegal drugs, however, but of medicinal drugs. To improve key performance indicators, prison governors can wean prisoners from relatively harmless drugs such as cannabis—which has never been known to kill anyone—and put them on killer drugs.

Emma Humphreys, who was abused throughout her life, became addicted to chloral hydrate in prison. She was released from prison when her sentence was judged to be unfair because of the foul abuse that she had suffered at the hands of a partner. She died in August this year, before she reached her 31st birthday, and her relatives are convinced that her death was due to her addiction to a medicinal drug that she acquired in prison.

On the final day of her life, Josie O'Dwyer took a list of drugs—I believe there were 13 in all—which I recorded in an early-day motion towards the end of the previous Session; it was an incredible cocktail of medicinal drugs that would have been enough to kill her many times over. Again, that woman was taking those drugs in prison.

Such is the regime of sedation in women's prisons that, on 13 August this year, there was a riot in Holloway—not because the women did not have their drugs, but because the drugs were delivered late. Three members of staff had flu that they had given to one another, and someone had to be brought in from outside to give the drugs. For a short period—a matter of a few hours—prisoners were without their sedation, which caused them to set fire to the bedding and the clothing within the hospital. We have a regime in prison which depends on women prisoners being sedated for most of the time.

By the time they get to prison, many young women have been abused in some way—by their partners, by society, by the care system or by their parents. A common reaction to abuse is self-mutilation. The almost universal medicine—it is a traditional, knee-jerk prescription—for such young women is largactol, a neuroleptic drug given to those who are deeply psychotic. The drug is used in other situations with which my hon. Friend the Minister will be familiar from his previous job.

Those young women form a special group in prison and, in the cruel jargon of prison, they are known as "muppets" because they walk in a funny way. These young women are not just damaged in prison, but probably their health has been damaged for life. The Committee recognised the importance of providing alternatives to prison and the probation programme which tackle the problems presented by women's programmes specifically. The Government have agreed with the Committee that the needs of women offenders should be effectively and systematically addressed.

I would commend to all hon. Members a book written by Angela Devlin called "Invisible Women", published in June of this year, about women in prisons. I challenge anyone not to feel moved and horrified by the evidence it provides of what has been created within women's prisons—not just by medicinal drugs, but particularly by illegal drugs. There are regimes of bullying and gangsterism in prison, and examples of horrific inhumanity of man and woman to women. Drugs are the currency of prisons, and the flow of the drugs coming into prisons is out of control. The searches carried out on women in prison are bestial and foul, and disgrace the name of this country. Many women's prisons can be described rightly as gulags, rather than the areas of solace, asylum and care that we would rather think them to be.

I look forward to the next report on the subject, and I am sure that the Committee will look in more detail at the subject. I am sure that we shall see an improvement—despite the rather complacent Government reaction. Governments always say, "Yes, there is a problem, but it is not as bad as it used to be and we are tackling it." They are not tackling it with sufficient speed.

Another of the Committee's recommendations is that handing out community sentences is an effective way in which to reduce prisoners' drug habits in the long term and to protect the public. Of course that can be done—it is being done elsewhere—but extraordinary situations can arise, such as the two separate cases in Gwent in which two offenders were found guilty of very serious offences for the second or third time, and told the court that they had become addicted to heroin in prison and that if they went back they would become addicted again, because more heroin is available in prison than on the streets of Gwent.

On those two separate occasions, the two different courts decided that the offenders should not go to prison. That is a sensible and civilised outcome, but hon. Members can imagine the howl from the tabloid press, saying that drug addicts can get out of going to prison. Certainly, the cost to society and to the individuals involved would have been far greater had they gone to prison.

I appeal to my hon. Friend the Minister, who has deep knowledge of these matters, not to follow the traditional course of Governments, who are addicted to their daily fix of tabloid admiration by promoting policies that appear to be tough. I get tired of reading press releases on law and order from the Government and from the previous Government in which one can hardly get to the third or fourth sentence without finding the word "tough".

I ask the Government to study the report and come up with intelligent policies, instead of retreating to the comfort blanket of daily adoration from the tabloid press.

5.47 pm

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): Clearly, the best alternative to prison sentences is for people not to be put in the position of facing a prison sentence in the first place. The soundbite of being tough on the causes of crime deserves better than to be abandoned now that it has served its pre-election purpose.

I welcome the report. As one of the Committee's members, I stress the fact that every recommendation had unanimous, all-party support. I fear that Parliament is failing to address the need to formulate linked policies that will help to create a society in which there is less crime, and consequently less need even to consider sending so many people to prison.

As the Chairman of the Select Committee said, the need to gaol some people for serious and repeat offences is not at issue, but the record number of prisoners that was reached earlier this year is unacceptable. The statement in the Government's response that

"Prison should be used only where necessary"

is to be welcomed. How will that message be conveyed to the courts?

I am in favour of joined-up government: matters affecting our daily lives should not be put into self-contained compartments, and there should be more understanding and consideration of how decisions in one area will affect activities elsewhere. Government and society generally need to adopt an holistic approach.

What will be the Government's definition of success regarding the statement that Labour will be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime? Being tough on crime presumably means that more people will end up in prison, while being tough on the causes of crime suggests that fewer people will drift into a life of crime. The prison population has increased by more than 5,000 in the past year; does the Minister agree that that suggests that the Government are failing to deliver on their promise to be tough on the causes of crime?

Apart from some of the former communist countries, Britain has a higher proportion of its population in prison than anywhere else in Europe: nearly 120 in every 100,000. I know that the Government want the United Kingdom to play a leading role in the European Union, but is the Minister proud of the fact that we are the current champions of the European prison league and are set to retain the title for the foreseeable future?

It is not an exaggeration to say that our prison system is in crisis. Paradoxically, it is a growth industry, and career prospects seem good—for prison staff, at any rate. The Home Secretary's millennium project appears to be to build several more prisons at £60 million a time to accommodate the unacceptably large numbers being sent to prison. No doubt those involved in the private prison sector, and promoters of the private finance initiative, are enthusiastically urging the Government to follow the example of the American privatised prisons. I suggest that we would do better to adopt what Finland has done in recent years to reduce its prison population while keeping crime levels in check.

In the past five years, the UK prison population has increased by more than 50 per cent., from 43,200 to 66,273 as at 4 December. It is good news that the previous estimate of a prison population of more than 82,000 by 2005 has recently been revised downwards, but even if next year's predicted figure of 63,200 proves correct, it will still leave Britain with a prison population out of step with most other developed countries. That is an appalling situation, and we must all endeavour to rectify it.

On financial grounds alone, the House should be united in wanting to see fewer people being sent to prison. In 1997-98, the annual average cost of keeping someone in prison was £23,000, which is a terrible waste of public money when one considers the cheaper and better alternatives to prison for people who receive relatively short sentences. That figure is not the true cost, but only the amount that comes from the Prison Service budget. To be added to that figure are any housing and social security benefits to which prisoners' families may be entitled, miscellaneous other costs and the loss of taxes and other contributions to the Exchequer that someone not in prison would pay if he or she had a job. For those in young offenders institutions, the cost soars to more than £30,000 a year for each person in custody.

The huge increase in the number of young people ending up in prison is especially worrying. From 1996 to 1997, the number increased by 12 per cent. to an average 10,800 over the year. In the same period, the number of women prisoners rose by 19 per cent., to 2,680. Currently, 53 babies are in prison with their mothers.

The evidence shows that prison is not working. The Home Affairs Committee's report addresses the need to tackle the prison time-bomb, and I had hoped that the Government would accept all the unanimous recommendations in the Committee's report. I am keen to see suspended sentences, curfew orders and electronic tagging for those who are convicted of less serious crimes and who are not a danger to society. I also feel that the introduction of criminal work orders—a title that more accurately reflects the reason why someone is doing the task that he or she has been directed by the courts to undertake, instead of the somewhat cosy-sounding community sentence, which implies some involvement with a voluntary organisation—would be another alternative to prison that should be developed, but to be credible they must be enforced stringently.

I am disappointed by the Government's negative response to the concept of weekend prisons, as unanimously recommended by the Committee. I urge the Minister to take an enlightened and positive step forward and introduce, as soon as possible, a pilot scheme to see how that innovative idea would work, as suggested by Sir David Ramsbotham, the chief inspector of prisons.

Mr. Mullin: The Committee recommended only that the Government consider weekend prisons, because the idea has serious logistical problems.

Mr. Russell: The Chairman of the Committee is correct, and that is borne out in the report and the Government's response. No one is saying that weekend prisons are an easy solution, but the Government should undertake a pilot scheme based on the suggestions from the chief inspector of prisons. Some of those who receive short prison sentences lose their jobs as a result. Their families then require housing and other benefits and, on release, the former prisoners often have difficulty finding work, with the consequence that they and their dependants continue to draw benefits. The public purse loses all round, and society has an ex-prisoner who may be tempted back into criminal ways.

As an alternative to full-time prison, someone who it is felt should still receive a short custodial sentence could be ordered to serve it at weekends, when his or her loss of liberty would arguably be most keenly felt. In that way, the individual could keep working and paying his or her way in the community. A criminal who might otherwise be gaoled

[Mr. Russell]

for 28 days, could be sentenced to serve 14 weekends from Friday evening to Sunday teatime, undertaking rehabilitation, retraining, environmental projects or other constructive activities under the auspices of the Prison Service. Most people would regard the loss of 14 weekends as more of a punishment than serving 28 days consecutively.

Our overcrowded prisons are universities of crime. Prisoners are locked up for hours on end with opportunities for education, work, rehabilitation and recreation periods reduced because of past spending cuts. The consequence is that many prisoners return to society better trained as criminals than when they went to gaol. More leave prison addicted to drugs, and more leave with AIDS than arrived with it. Prison suicides have increased. There have been 74 self-inflicted deaths this year—more than in each of the past three years. Does the Minister think that prison is the right place for the estimated 28,000 prisoners who suffer from mental health or drugs problems?

The amount of what is called purposeful activity provided for prisoners has fallen to less than 24 hours a week on average. What plans does the Minister have to reverse the cuts? Does he agree that one of the best ways to reduce reoffending is to develop constructive regimes in prisons, with the focus on rehabilitation, retraining, education and work? Will he give an assurance that, after years of cuts by the previous Government, the probation service will be given the necessary resources for the critical role that it has to play?

Up to 90,000 offenders are released from custody into the community every year. Some 53 per cent. are reconvicted within two years, but the figure for young offenders is 75 per cent. and for juveniles, 89 per cent. The alternatives to prison sentences advanced by the Home Affairs Committee would result in fewer people going to gaol in the first place, and I am confident that they would lead to less reoffending.

The most effective long-term alternative to prison sentences is for the Government to adopt an holistic approach, especially to young people. Some 50 per cent. of known offenders are under 21, and 70 per cent. of adult offenders were convicted of a criminal offence before they were 21. The knowledge that most of those in prison committed their first offence before their 21st birthday makes it imperative that measures are taken to prevent youngsters from taking those first steps on the criminal ladder.

To target youth crime, however, we need to do more than deal with the situation when it arises, which is a classic example of looking at a situation in isolation. Slicing up life into compartments is a recipe for creating conditions in which criminal activity will result. An obvious example is housing. Bad housing is not an excuse for criminal activity—some of the worst criminals come from wealthy backgrounds—but poor housing can provide a breeding environment for criminal activity. More needs to be done to improve the nation's housing provision.

Does the Minister feel that his crusade to reduce the number of prisoners is helped when the Department for Education and Employment, and others, concentrate on demanding ever higher academic standards, without appreciating that many youngsters need greater encouragement in non-academic areas? We need to give equal importance to the different contributions that all young people can make to their communities. For many young people, there is more to life than the classroom and swotting. The Government should tell all young people that they have a contribution to make to society, regardless of their academic abilities.

Mr. Corbett: I hope that the hon. Gentleman is not saying that, because young people grow up in deprived areas with high and persistent levels of unemployment, their schools, teachers, school governors and parents should say that it is not worth bothering to encourage those children to do better than they think they can.

Mr. Russell: I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's intervention. I was trying to make the exactly opposite point. I want us all to tell all young people that they are of value to society and have a contribution to make. I am criticising the idea that the only people of value are those who gain high academic achievement. I do not believe that that is true, and I do not believe that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) thinks so, either.

A major way in which to reduce criminal activity by young people, and therefore to reduce the prison population, would be for relevant Departments to take measures to encourage youngsters to become more involved in their communities. That would give them pride in their neighbourhoods and a belief that they were valued.

For example, instead of underfunding local government, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions could make specific grants to enable uniformed and other youth organisations to have free use of school buildings, rather than being driven out of them by high charges. The Ministry of Defence could offer better funding for cadet forces, so that they could expand and recruit more youngsters. The Department for Education and Employment could provide financial support for youth bands or arts projects. Encouragement for conservation and similar projects could involve more young people.

Financial investment in our young people will pay dividends. Better citizens will result if we abandon the previous Government's view that there is no such thing as society. There would be less cost later to the public purse if fewer people drifted into crime and had to be sent to prison. The more we can do to stop people committing crime, the lower the prison population will be. The best alternative to prison sentences is to fund youth activities, which would be a much better use of public money than spending £23,000 a year for everyone in prison. Keeping just 44 people out of prison would save £1 million, and we can all think of how that money could be more productively invested in young people and local communities.

There is an opinion that young people involved in uniformed and other activities are far less likely to be involved in criminal activity than those who do not experience such productive and organised activities. Perhaps the Minister can confirm that that is true. If he does not have the evidence, may I suggest that we survey young people currently serving custodial sentences? I am confident that investing substantially in recognised youth movements and encouraging youngsters to participate

would result in fewer young people drifting into criminal or anti-social behaviour. Such expenditure would be cost-effective.

The best way in which to achieve joined-up government for young people would be the appointment of a Minister for youth. That person would need to be popular and charismatic in the eyes of young people. An obvious candidate would be the Minister of State himself.

As a first step towards reducing the UK prison population, the Home Affairs Committee's recommendations should be implemented. However, I urge the Minister to take a wider view of what should be done if we are seriously and realistically to tackle crime. Being tough on the causes of crime is a positive way in which to provide an alternative to prison sentences.

6.2 pm

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): Following my experiences during the inquiry, I thank the probation service, the social services, the police, the fire service and a raft of voluntary organisations, and I congratulate them on working with such commitment and dedication on our behalf. They try to give more hope and meaning to the lives of vulnerable and disjointed young people. Their jobs are not easy, because many of the people with whom they deal come from the most horrendous backgrounds. About a third of those sent to young offenders' institutions have no contact with home. About 40 per cent. have bad or intermittent contact with home. Many have no regular place to lay their heads at night. We should not underestimate the problems that we ask the various agencies to cope with for us.

My approach to the report and to the Government's response is that the argument is not over whether prison is better than non-custodial community sentences. There is widespread recognition that only custodial sentences will suffice for some people before the courts, especially for those who use violence against vulnerable people such as women, children and the elderly. It is not well understood, however, that the main victims of violence are, surprisingly, young people themselves. They are seen to be the perpetrators of most violence, but it is not so. They are in fact the victims.

That said, I have reached the conclusion that too many of those responsible for handing out sentences in our various courts are unaware of the menu of options available for community and non-custodial sentences. No doubt they are influenced by silly headlines in newspapers that ought to be more responsible. As my hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) has said, it is wrong for newspapers to say that "so-and-so walks free". A community sentence is not walking free.

Mr. Vinnie Jones, the footballer, perhaps best demonstrates that fact. Having been sentenced for a cruel and grievous assault on a neighbour, Mr. Jones found that some publicity attached to the first hours of his community service. Perhaps Mr. Jones is unused to having his photograph taken, but he failed to turn up on three occasions, and instructed his solicitor to return to court to try to have his community service order reduced. I am glad that the court took the opposite view: it lengthened his sentence, and fined him for not doing what he was bound to do.

Mr. Jones, and anyone else in such a situation, should not accept a community service order if they prefer the alternative of prison. It is their choice, and they are free to make it, even if the courts may regret that fact.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South has mentioned that Mr. Peter Coad, a senior probation officer who had a low opinion of the probation service's achievements, said that the best alternative to prison was not to commit a crime. I took his meaning to be that the best alternative was not to be found committing the crime as well as not committing it. That is, of course, true: it is a blinding glimpse of the obvious, but solutions are not as easy as that.

During the general election—I suspect many of my colleagues found the same thing—in every part of my constituency, groups of residents raised the issue of anti-social behaviour and crime. They did not see those problems in party political terms, and they expected whatever Government were elected—it happened to be my party's Government—to help them to reclaim the right to live in peace and security in and around their homes. That is a simple enough demand. However, more police officers, more people in prison and longer sentences will not deliver it. They may make a contribution, but they will not deliver it.

Two stories from my constituency will illustrate the point. On a main road, a dreadful three-storey block of flats containing 20 or so families, with walkways on the outside, was an absolute shambles. The council decided to spend money on doing up the block, and letters went out to say that this, that and the other would be done in six months' time, and that the council would try not to wake the baby or anyone working nights.

All went well. There was landscaping, and the whole thing looked great. Towards the end of the work, I wrote to each resident to say how nice the work looked and that if they were having a party, I would bring some beer. I was not looking for votes; the matter was too important for that. I wanted to encourage those people to be proud of what had happened in and around their homes. The whole area had been transformed. Eighteen months later, it was almost as bad as it was before the work started. The lesson that I drew from that—I agreed with Birmingham city council housing officers on this—is that unless residents feel that they own the process, there is no point in proceeding.

I invite hon. Members to come with me about four miles further south in my constituency, to the former Castle Bromwich airfield, where 12,000 Spitfires, made over the road in what is now the Jaguar car factory, were personally flown by the chief test pilot. The site became the Castle Vale housing estate, which comprises 34 tower blocks and dozens of blocks of maisonettes. Anyone wanting to see a hell-hole should have seen Castle Vale 12 or 15 years ago. It embodied what I felt merited the description "civic pigsty".

Anyone coming across Castle Vale for the first time found it hard to believe what he was seeing—at least, I did. One wondered who cared for such places. Certainly, no one on the city council cared. I know all about cuts in housing budgets and so on, but I am not interested in that—there is some money. The whole place shouted total and absolute neglect. There was then an offer to set up one of only six housing action trusts in the country.

[Mr. Robin Corbett]

HATs were set up by the previous Government, who, by the way, had the wit and wisdom to change the rules to enable tenants, at the end of the exercise, to hold a ballot on whether they wanted to have the city council back as their landlord or, as I hope will happen in the Castle Vale area, to set up their own tenant management organisation.

When it came to the ballot, 93 per cent. of the tenants who participated voted for the HAT, which meant that about £300 million of public and private money would be put into the area. That was four years ago. I picked up a point made by the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell) in this connection. We are now four years into the process. The eight great centre tower blocks, which is where the main Spitfire runway was, have gone. Not quite 12 months ago, the first buildings of the new Castle Vale became visible because they were on the central site. In a matter of weeks, the whole atmosphere of the estate changed, and I shall illustrate that with two examples.

First, I am very proud of the four primary schools on the estate, which is why I said what I did to the hon. Member for Colchester. Those schools achieve miracles. They regularly turn out children to go to the secondary school on the estate at the age of 11 with average reading ages of 14 and 15. It is difficult to get through the front door of one school because of all the national awards that it has won, not in soft subjects, but for mathematics marathons and achievements in science. The remarkable head teacher and her staff say that of course such things can be done, but that one has to work two or three times harder in such areas than in areas with less deprivation.

Secondly, the HAT was never wholly, solely or mainly about bricks and mortar, important though they are. It was about giving people back hope, training and jobs; it was about one-to-one counselling for single parents—mainly mothers—and the work of outstanding organisations such as Home Start, which will quietly hold out a hand to parents in despair. Parents might be in despair because of deprivation or unemployment, but also because they feel that they cannot cope and cannot bring up their children in the way they want. Home Start literally holds out a hand. When another hand is put in it, it gently grasps that hand. The success of that organisation can be measured by the fact that many of its regular volunteers once came through the door, holding out a hand.

What has happened on the estate in the past 12 or 18 months that makes me so proud? I am told—I am sure that it is true—that, if an autopsy were carried out on me, the words "Castle Vale" would be found engraved on my heart. Crime has been reduced by about a third, but I do not say that with surprise. I would expect that to be the case. It is almost as if people have grown a foot in height after getting jobs.

A magnificent range of about two dozen to 30 firms, large and small—including the Jaguar plant, Cincinnati, the machine tool manufacturer, and GKN Hardy Spicer, which makes front-wheel drives—on the rim of this isolated island estate are offering young people opportunities through the new deal. I am not criticising the Opposition when I say that—it might also be their experience—but, in this part of Birmingham, the new deal has not only held out a lifeline to young people who were detached and who were denied hope, but it has delivered.

I commend the Government on agreeing with the Committee about the importance of alternatives to custodial sentences. It might seem that I am going to say the opposite, but I ask to House to bear with me. The Kingstanding part of my constituency is virtually one large housing estate. There is nothing new in what I am about to say. On that estate, there is someone who is a one-man, anti-social crime wave. Let us call him John, although the warders now know him by his real name. Between the ages of 14 and 18, he was charged 34 times and was given the equivalent of three and three quarter years in young offenders' institutions. He was also handed heaven knows how many community service orders of one sort or another. As I understand it, he is in prison—and so he should be, given the opportunities that were offered to him but not taken.

I suppose that the easy thing to say is that John had his chance and did not take it, but I have to tell Mr. Coad and others who share his views that life is not like that. When I feel close to despair about such things, it is because of what the great city of Birmingham has achieved this year alone. It has been host to the G8 summit, the Eurovision song contest and 34,000 members of Lions International. It is a city where things are happening. I am getting parochial, but I get cross and frustrated when people like John cannot see that this involves them and that there is something in it for them.

We cannot walk away from the Johns of this world, because they cost everyone of my constituents something. They cost them in fear, because my constituents will not answer the door after dark and will not walk down the street after 3 pm at this time of year. Solutions have to be found. The probation service is now on the case—one might have hoped that it could have got on board earlier—and is involved in, for example, the "what works" programme. We need to design and carry out these programmes in such a way that they have better prospects of offering young people the opportunity to lead more successful and fulfilling lives. The new deal can help.

The hon. Member for Colchester has mentioned pupils being pushed at school to make them believe that they can attain more than they have. That is doubly important at schools where 60 or 70 per cent. of the pupils come from families poor enough to receive free school meals—their future is at stake, as well as that of those who come from a more comfortable background. We owe those pupils something, but there is more to it than that. This country, our society, and certainly the city of Birmingham need to engage them. We need their skills, and they need them to help them to settle into a happier, more fulfilling way of life.

6.20 pm

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): I am sure that the whole House enjoyed the speech of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett). It was a remarkable personal contribution to the debate, and one full of emotion. I went misty-eyed when I heard mention of 12,000 Spitfires, quite apart from what he told us about the transformation of the Castle Vale estate as a result of the housing action trust.

I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that I was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the then Minister for Housing and Planning, my right hon. Friend the Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), when HATs

were put in place. I hope that this will not be my only opportunity to remind the House that the Conservative party made important contributions to the improvement of our country. I think that all hon. Members who have HATs in their constituencies will recognise the important changes that HATs have brought about for the better.

The trouble with the debate is that it is largely well informed. It is calm and sometimes moving, as exemplified by the speech of the hon. Member for Erdington. It is therefore guaranteed to have no media coverage. We are among friends talking to ourselves. The outside world will not be listening, because we are not at one another's throats.

I reject completely the idea that the Select Committee's report is soft and that it represents an attempt by an all-party Committee to come up with a soft option for criminals. It is an extremely hard-hitting report, and it deserves to be seen as such. I shall detain the House for a moment by quoting some examples and putting them on the record. There are too many people outside the House who have tried to read into the report that the Committee has been anxious to empty prisons—I speak rather crudely—to put prisoners on community service orders. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Committee's second conclusion and recommendation reads:

"Prison will always be necessary for the most dangerous and/or persistent criminals, but it must be closely targeted on them, with other offenders being given non-custodial sentences which are effective and in which sentencers and the public have confidence."

Those are extremely important riders to our suggestion about the role of non-custodial sentences.

Recommendation 15 reads:

"Strict enforcement of community sentences is vital if they are to represent a credible alternative to prison and retain the confidence of sentencers and the public. If community sentences are to be credible they must be enforced stringently."

Recommendation 16 states:

"It is essential that offenders who breach community sentences are returned to court quickly."

Recommendation 18 says:

"We . . . recommend that the Home Office rectify this situation"—

of breaches not being enforced—

"and ensure that offenders who flagrantly breach the terms of community sentences may be sent to prison".

This is a tough report, not a soft one. I hope that, by citing these examples, I can provide the House and those outside with evidence that it is tough. This may be a small point, but it is one worth noting: we were much impressed with the Lord Chief Justice's suggestion that community service orders should be renamed. He suggested that they should be called criminal work orders, and we supported him. I note that the Government have said that they are prepared to consider that suggestion. We hope that the Minister will make the debate a little more newsworthy by saying that he accepts that suggestion at least. That would send out the clearest possible message that community service orders are intended to be nothing other than criminal work orders.

For so long as society believes in the concept of repentance and forgiveness, offenders will have to return to the community at some point. We shall have to deal with their return and with what we do with them in the meantime. I said to the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) that I had some sympathy with Mr. Coad. One of Mr. Coad's points was that, if offenders are in gaol, they cannot go out burgling people's property and causing them enormous distress. That is an irrefutable fact. However, if the prison population is to increase to 200,000, certain consequences have to be considered.

There is the small matter of planning consent for new prisons. We all know that, as soon as anyone proposes having a prison anywhere near us, our constituents are on our backs, saying, "Not on your life, guv'nor. You jolly well fight it." Tripling the prison population space would require considerable dexterity in the manipulation of planning regulations. The previous Conservative Government found a disused ship somewhere, which they parked off the south coast of England. That was one way of getting around the problem of people and their backyards. Presumably, in that instance, they were not too worried.

We must consider whether prison is the only answer to crime. Manifestly it is not, so what are the options? We, the Committee, were struck by the many schemes that were being tried out throughout the country. I think that the hon. Member for Sunderland, South said that there were 274.

Mr. Mullin: No, 267.

Mr. Howarth: There is a huge number of schemes, many of which are not well known to the public.

One of our important conclusions is set out in recommendation 9. We found that there was no real assessment—the hon. Member for Sunderland, South mentioned this—of the true effectiveness of these schemes. I think that the Home Office has taken note of that. I should like to say, in answer to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), that I think that he had a fair point. The Government say, "We quite understand. The Committee is right on this and action needs to be taken, and we will be taking it. Things are a bit better."

I urge the Minister to take serious note of recommendation 9. If non-custodial sentences are to command public confidence, it is essential that they are evaluated on the basis that some are good, some are not so good and others are a waste of space. There will be inevitably an element of trialling. It will be necessary to suck it and see before deciding whether certain schemes will work.

Recommendation 9 reads:

"The absence of rigorous assessment of the effectiveness of community sentences is astonishing. Without it confidence in them must be limited and sentencing policy a matter of guess-work and optimism."

That is strong language for a Select Committee. We state in print that we find it astonishing that there is that lack of effectiveness in the validation and assessment of community sentence schemes. I hope that the Minister will devote some attention to our recommendation.

The members of the Committee will know that I had already had wind of the interesting airborne initiative Scotland scheme. I probably had something of a reputation for being fairly tough on crime before the Government came up with "tough on crime, tough on criminals and tough on the causes of crime". However, I

[Mr. Howarth]

see cases for not banging up people in gaol as a knee-jerk reaction. There is a case for other schemes, and I was most impressed by the airborne initiative scheme in Scotland, as I was by other schemes that I came across throughout the country. It was noticeable that, where a scheme provided young offenders, in particular, with an element of self-respect and self-confidence—two key factors which had been entirely missing in their lives by virtue of their upbringing and background—they were capable of being rescued. I suggest that a key criterion in assessing the effectiveness of these schemes is whether they are able to instil in persistent young offenders a sense of self-respect and a sense of purpose in life.

We were able to see the operation of the tagging scheme. I am bound to say that at this stage I want to be a bit mischievous. We were all impressed by tagging, which we saw Securicor operating in Manchester. I thought that it was superb, but I shall not bore the House with the details.

I said that I intended to be mischievous. I remind the House that, when the matter was proposed by my noble Friend Lord Patten, who was then Minister of State, Home Department, his opposite number, the then shadow Home Secretary, Lord Hattersley, who is now clad in Irvine, or rather, ermine, in another place—a Freudian slip there, I fear—responded by saying:

"Electric tagging would be a farce if it were ever implemented in this country."—[*Official Report*, 20 November 1990; Vol. 181, c. 160.]

In Committee, during detailed consideration of electronic monitoring, the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr. Sheerman), who was then a Front-Bench spokesman, said:

"Opposition Members oppose the provisions on electronic monitoring with no equivocation whatever. We are totally opposed to electronic monitoring of offenders and on this issue, we have the overwhelming support of organisations working within the criminal justice system."—[*Official Report, Standing Committee A*, 18 December 1990; c. 273.]

I should like to hear from the Minister an acknowledgement that the Labour party, when in opposition, got it wrong, and that it now congratulates the Conservative Government on having introduced a non-custodial sentence that has been of huge benefit. As that system is to go nationwide from the end of next year, I am sure that the Government will not be able to deny that.

I shall not detain the House too long, but I shall deal with a couple of other topics. The first is drugs, a subject that the Select Committee will address in more detail in our next examination. I support the comments of my hon. Friend the Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) on the matter. Drugs are a scourge in our country. Parents throughout the land have a paranoid fear that their child will fall foul of drugs and, even worse, that they will not recognise the signs. I have three children and I understand that fear, which is widespread.

Drugs kill people. They imprison young people for the rest of their lives. I hope that the Government will consider the matter carefully and accept that, if we are to deal with the problem, there must be an element of compulsion about it. When we travelled around the country during our inquiry, one of the saddest experiences was our visit to Dumbarton, where we sat with a group of youngsters who were hard drug addicts. They required £80 a day to fund their heroin habit, and to obtain the money they stole and burgled. One of the girls told us that, when she left our company, she was going to steal from a shop in order to fund the habit.

I do not believe that simply banging up such people in prison is the answer. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Woking. We need specialised residential institutions where those young people can be detoxified. That is the only way in which we will resolve the problem. It is draconian, but the crisis we face is of such magnitude that a draconian measure is justified. We would be ducking our responsibilities as Members of Parliament were we not to tackle the issue head on.

Other factors have not been discussed in detail in the debate. The minor crimes described by the hon. Members for Sunderland, South and for Erdington irritate our constituents and cause them grief. Minor vandalism and such offences are, in my view, the result of a growing lack of respect for parents, authority and our institutions. It is incumbent on us all to teach children not their rights, but their duties. The time has come to swing the pendulum back and to make them understand their duties and responsibilities.

As members of the Committee know, the other day I saw two young boys aged 14 breaking into my neighbour's car with a metal implement. Those were two kids out of school at lunchtime, walking down the street on the off-chance, but armed, with intent. What do we do about people like that? I understand that they came from respectable households. They have been let off with a caution. It was only because I got there, chased them down the road and caught up with one of them that we cleared up that bit of crime.

I should tell the Minister that I was appalled by the attitude of some other adults, who would not help me for fear that they would be charged with abusing children. I hope that he will say that the Government do not approve of that, and that they approve of members of the public going to assist the police.

I hope that those outside will recognise that this is a tough report. Alternatives to custody are designed not simply to empty the prisons, but to provide tough and hard sentences. They are perhaps the only way in which we shall get young offenders weaned off drugs and reduce the crimes that are spawned as a result of drug taking. In that way, we shall make our society better.

6.36 pm

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): One of the advantages of attending debates such as this is that one leaves the Chamber at the end of the debate having learned something. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) for giving us a little tour of his constituency and telling us something about the conditions of the people whom he represents.

I remember speaking after the hon. Member for Salford (Ms Blears) in the Second Reading debate on the Crime and Disorder Bill and being struck, and even appalled, by what she told us about the rate of crime in her constituency. If I remember correctly, the figures that she gave for crime in her constituency during the week preceding the debate were the equivalent of the crime figures in my constituency for the previous decade.

Our constituencies are entirely different. I represent a largely rural and well-to-do area. We have our criminal statistics. We have people who buy, sell and use drugs, but I am grateful to the hon. Member for Erdington for bringing me out of my rather comfortable existence and making me realise that England is a diverse country. Although we pass Acts of Parliament that are supposed to deal uniformly with the entire country, there are places that need special attention and particular measures to assist.

I am fortunate to participate in the debate because it gives me the opportunity to congratulate the Minister on his promotion. As many hon. Members know, he had my job not long ago—the shadow spokesman on the Lord Chancellor's Department—so it seems that my political life is not entirely without hope.

I congratulate the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, the other hon. Members who serve on it and their Clerks on their industry in producing the report on alternatives to prison sentences. As a member of the Committee under the chairmanship of Sir Ivan Lawrence from 1992 until the end of 1994, when I left on my appointment as a Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friends the Members for Eddisbury (Sir A. Goodlad) and for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) in the Foreign Office, I always take a particular interest in the Committee's reports and activities.

I am a quiet admirer of the hon. Member for Sunderland, South, although it may not do him any good for me to say so, for his work in bringing to wider public attention a number of criminal cases of miscarriages of justice. Some of that work that he did in collaboration with my late predecessor, Sir John Farr. They were, as the House will agree, unlikely collaborators, one being a traditional Conservative landowner of the old school and the other a Labour journalist and writer. It was a common interest in justice and fairness that brought them together. I hope that the same interest breaches the political divide this evening. Certainly, from all that I know of John Farr and what he did to see justice in the case of the Birmingham Six, I believe that he would have taken a close interest in the work that the Chairman and members of the Select Committee on Home Affairs are doing.

It behoves us all to keep a close eye on those matters that we sometimes take for granted: free and uninhibited access to the courts for every citizen; an impartial and incorruptible judiciary; a jury system that commands public confidence; lawyers who cannot be bought and sold and who can speak up for their clients without fear for their lives or careers; and—germane to our discussions—a criminal justice system that is capable of acquitting the innocent while dealing with the guilty humanely and firmly, but sensibly, and in such a way that the public are satisfied that they can sleep easy in their beds knowing that right has been done, and offenders know that they have got their just desserts and punishment that fits the crime.

I have been an assistant recorder in the Crown court for only a short time. My practice at the Bar could not be further removed from the criminal courts, but in the short time that I have been doing my judicial training—in court, sitting beside Crown court judges; on residential courses, run by the Judicial Studies Board; and sitting as a judge—I have been struck by the attitude of those on the Bench. They will do all in their power to avoid sending a defendant to prison, if a suitable alternative can be found and is available.

Judges do not send the guilty to prison because they enjoy depriving people of their liberty. Certainly by the time that they come to sentence, and often beforehand, judges know the backgrounds and family circumstances of the accused, and they see real people before them in the dock: the incompetent, the drug-addicted, the inadequate and the feckless, in human form. They also see the evil, the dangerous and the dishonest.

Whatever the characteristics, judges deal most often with a man, usually in his late teens or early 20s—in London or other big cities, he will probably be a drug user—who is in any event unemployed and in receipt of state benefits. He will probably be the father of at least one small child by a mother who is not his wife, and with whom he does not live in anything resembling a traditional family. He may have grown up in circumstances that mirror his children's.

That is the picture of human life facing the judge. It is a daily experience. In the House of Commons we see only the statistics about projected prison populations, reoffending rates and the expense of dealing with the never-ending parade of crimes and criminals. We see the story that is unfolding outside at a safe remove. We know what we are told and what we believe. We come here with our prejudices and our experiences, but we are unlikely to have shared the experiences of either the criminal or the sentencer.

Perhaps one of my prejudices—this relates to an intervention by the hon. Member for Erdington on the Chairman of the Home Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Sunderland, South—is the belief that people who have a job tend not to commit crimes, but that unemployment of itself is not an excuse for committing crimes. There is a link—a correlation—between unemployment and criminality, but there is not a causal link. There should not be.

My first point beyond those happy introductory remarks is that it would do no harm—and, I believe, a lot of good—if Home Office and other Ministers charged with management of our criminal justice system, and with devising policies to improve it, spent time in the criminal courts to see for themselves what is involved in trying and sentencing a case. Ministerial visits to prisons, court buildings, probation offices and police stations are worth while, but they provide only a partial picture.

Ministers should go to see what happens to the defendant, the witness, the jury, the court staff and the judge or the magistrate in the stage between arrest and punishment, and then consider whether the criminal justice Bills that we pass almost annually are always the answer to the real or perceived problems that we face.

I was struck, as was the hon. Member for Erdington, with the evidence that is recounted at paragraph 134 of the Select Committee report. It deals with Lord Bingham's wish that sentencers should visit community sentence venues to see what is happening. The report states:

"He undertook to encourage judges to make such visits but reminded the Committee"—

I urge the House to bear this in mind as well—

"that 'judges are under great pressure to try cases. The courts have a backlog, they are open to criticism if the delays build up, so this kind of activity has to get fitted in. It should be fitted in and I totally agree with the point that you'"—

[Mr. Edward Garnier]

the hon. Member for Sunderland, South—

"'are making that this is a valuable way of educating oneself into the realities of what one is imposing on others'."

One has to be realistic about that. As the learned Lord Chief Justice said, our courts are enduring a backlog of cases. Judges simply do not have time to make these visits, although they would do much good were they able to do so. I urge the Government, hon. Members and members of the Select Committee not to push too much on our judges, who are already overburdened. It is easy to make tabloid remarks about judges, but they are not as they are caricatured. They work hard, and requiring them to spend more time out of court looking at probation centres and so forth—although well intended—cannot easily be achieved.

On the subject of the Lord Chief Justice, I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth), and others who have referred to it, that it would be better and more publicly acceptable to describe community sentences as criminal work orders. I hope that the Government will give that rapid consideration.

My second point is that another thing that might be learned is that the system by which those who breach probation orders or other community sentences are returned to court is cumbersome and slow. A defendant who breaks the terms of the sentence has to be summonsed to appear at a magistrates court, irrespective of whether the sentence was handed down in the Crown court.

I have read that part of the report which deals with the return of offenders to court—indeed, I have read the whole report—and I accept and agree with conclusion and recommendation 16, save that I have reservations about the civilianisation of that aspect of the criminal justice system. I also agree with conclusion 18, about the steps that should be taken to reinvigorate that part of the community sentence regime, but I have a small practical solution to offer. Those who breach community sentences from the Crown court should be arrested and brought back directly to the Crown court, rather than being summonsed to appear before a magistrates court to be dealt with.

By the time that the summons is served—we know about the difficulties in effecting service—and the defendant appears before the magistrates, the original defence is part of distant history, the trial was some time ago and the breach is remote. If magistrates then decided to remand the defendant to the Crown court to be dealt with, we would face yet further delay.

Far better to cut out that circuitous route by sending the malefactor straight back to the sentencing Crown court. I wrote to the Home Secretary about that two or three weeks ago. I dare say that General Pinochet has been rather more on his mind than my letter, but I hope that either the Minister of State or the Home Secretary will in due course provide me with an answer that makes sense.

I am rapidly running out of time, but I want briefly to flag up one or two other points. Conclusion 20 of the Select Committee report deals with pre-sentence reports. My experience, for what it is worth, is that probation officers make it clear in drafting such reports that, if there is no available remedy other than custody, custody will be the one that they recommend. They are no longer shy about making that recommendation. I hope that the House and the Home Affairs Committee will take that point from me.

I urge the Government not to be persuaded by any argument that the probation service should have its name changed to some modern, "relevant" or "cool" title. We all understand the term "probation service". It would be sensible to have a national service, and I trust that that can be looked at carefully, but there is absolutely no need whatever to change the name of the service.

I support conclusion 36, about better use of suspended prison sentences. They are a weapon in our criminal justice system that has been allowed to fall away. I hope that the Government will bring them back.

At the risk of sounding fatalistic, I draw attention to paragraph 46 of the Select Committee report. Simply because of time constraints, I shall not refer to it in detail, save to draw the House's attention to the headline "Reoffending, deterrence and rehabilitation". The two-year reconviction rate for all types of sentence is horribly high. It is more than 50 per cent. and for some sentences as high as 74 per cent. That applies to probation orders with the requirement to attend a probation centre.

Thus, nothing that we are suggesting or considering provides the perfect answer. I simply ask that the Government look calmly and sensibly at this excellent report, and I urge all hon. Members not to bully judges into producing speedy answers to impossible questions.

6.50 pm

Mr. Martin Linton (Battersea): I listened carefully to what the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier) said about magistrates and judges. I also listened with great interest to the speeches of the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins), who is a judge, and my hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Miss Johnson), who is a magistrate. I am a member of the Home Affairs Committee but have no experience whatever in the criminal justice system. Although that is often a disadvantage, it is sometimes an advantage, because it means that I see the issues with fresh eyes.

I wish to concentrate for a few minutes on a rather buried aspect of the report. The report seeks to answer two questions: first, are community sentences effective; and, secondly, do sentencers make enough use of community sentences? The Committee drew attention to the Home Office research on that subject. When dealing with such an issue, the probation service is usually under examination and must answer questions on the effectiveness of community sentences. However, the magistracy and the judiciary should also be under the spotlight.

One of the tables produced by the Home Office research study shows that magistrates were asked whether they were satisfied with the work of the probation service, and 89 per cent. said that they were very or quite satisfied. The same figure applied to stipendiaries, and 85 per cent. of judges were satisfied. It is therefore wrong to say that people within the criminal justice system are greatly dissatisfied with the probation service. However, if we put the question the other way round, and ask whether we should have complete confidence in, and satisfaction with, the magistracy and the judiciary, we may reach a different conclusion.

The Home Office also asked magistrates, stipendiaries and judges whether, in the previous two years, they had visited probation centres or community service placements. The hon. and learned Member for Harborough referred to that research. The survey showed that fewer than half the magistrates had visited a probation centre, and that 82 per cent. of stipendiaries had not visited a probation centre. More probation offices had been visited, but that is not surprising, as they are often in the court building.

Community sentences are the most common sentence. In the past two years, three quarters of the magistrates and judges, and 93 per cent. of stipendiaries, had not visited a community sentence placement or even seen one in operation.

Whatever the wisdom or otherwise of their sentences, it is asking for trouble to hand out a sentence when one has no recent experience of what it involves. We would find it extraordinary if the director of a food company had never tasted his products or if the director of a car company had never driven the car that the company produced, but very few of those who are essentially the directors of the criminal justice system bother to see for themselves the effect of the sentences that they hand out. I do not have the figures for the frequency of prison visits by magistrates, judges and stipendiaries, but one can have little confidence in them, given the frequency of their visits to probation centres.

The hon. and learned Member for Harborough quoted with approval Lord Bingham's comment to the Committee that it was desirable that people should look at what was happening, and that he was slightly surprised that more had not done so. When he gave evidence to the Committee, he went no further than to encourage judges to make more frequent visits. The hon. and learned Gentleman said that, although he agreed with that, we should not push judges because they were busy people.

If sentences are to be effective, sentencers must know what they are sentencing people to. The magistrates themselves say that. The Home Office research study asked magistrates and stipendiaries whether they ever learned about the outcome of the community sentences that they handed out, and 87 per cent. of magistrates said that they either never heard, or only occasionally heard, the outcome. The figure for stipendiaries was slightly lower because they are, after all, full-time. Even so, two thirds of them had either never heard of the outcome, or heard only occasionally.

Magistrates were then asked whether they needed to know more about the outcome of their cases—the very point made by the hon. and learned Member for Harborough. Two thirds of the magistrates accepted that they needed to know more, despite the fact that most of them had just admitted that they rarely knew anything about them. Thus, they see the fault in the system: they pass sentences without knowing what they are doing.

The Home Office has started community sentence demonstration projects in Shrewsbury and Teesside, one of which we visited, to try to make magistrates and judges more aware of the sentences that they hand out. The National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders pointed out that, unlike doctors, sentencers always see their failures return to court but never see their successes. If we are to have confidence in community sentences, it is absolutely vital that magistrates and judges take the trouble to visit placements so that they know what they are sentencing people to.

6.57 pm

Mr. David Ruffley (Bury St. Edmunds): This interesting debate and the report that gives rise to it are uppermost in our minds for one reason: the increase in the prison population and the estimates for that increase. Five years ago, some 43,000 people were in prison; in September this year, that figure rose to 66,000, and the projection for the next seven years is more than 82,000. That represents a serious problem for the Government by any standard, not least because of the resource implications for the Exchequer in funding such a potential expansion in prison capacity.

I shall focus my remarks on two questions. First, how have we reached this position, and what policies have this Government and the previous Government pursued to get us to this position? Secondly, what radical solutions, which would amount to alternatives to custodial sentences, have been outlined in the report?

I shall begin by summarising the main thrust of criminal justice policy in the past 10 years. On the one hand was the view that prison is an expensive way of making bad people worse—a view largely held by the former right hon. Member for Witney, now the noble Lord Hurd; on the other is the view that prison works—a view expounded by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard). I think that prison does work.

I take issue with the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin) and other Labour Members because, in the three years until the general election, recorded crime fell by 10 per cent. The Government have been the happy beneficiary of that fall in recorded crime. They have not sought to reverse the policy that the previous Administration established to achieve that fall. The Minister is happy to endorse the sentencing regime that we put in place. If Labour Members are not happy with this tough sentencing regime and go for more soft disposals, the crime figures may not be pegged at present levels. That issue has not been addressed in the debate.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): Is not the point about criminal policy not whether solutions are hard or soft, but whether they are effective?

Mr. Ruffley: The hon. Lady is right. No one doubts that, in the three years to 1997, recorded crime fell. That fall in crime coincided with the implementation of a tougher sentencing regime by Home Office Ministers in the Conservative Administration. That was manifestly a policy of containment. It may sound crude, but we all know intuitively that, if hardened criminals are locked up, they are not on the streets committing crime. As a rough rule of thumb, it is estimated that two thirds of recorded crime is committed by one fifth of hard-core serial offenders, so a policy of containment goes some way towards cutting the crime rate. The evidence shows that that has happened—certainly up until 1997. I believe that the trend is a decline in the rate of increase of recorded crime.

Mr. Mullin: If the hon. Gentleman refers to my speech, he will find that I dealt with that point. I said that prison was effective as a form of containment, although it did not prevent people from offending when they were

[Mr. Mullin]

released. A couple of other factors also account for the fall in crime. One is the 40 per cent. reduction in unemployment in the relevant period, and the other is the fact that policing in the past few years has been much more effective.

Mr. Ruffley: The hon. Gentleman is right. There have also been improvements in education and training. The hon. Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett), in his eloquent speech, spoke for everyone in the Chamber. Innovative youth projects—which in the jargon are referred to as diversionary disposals—better education and training, more economic activity and more job creation all contribute to a falling crime rate. It is not fair to characterise the view of Conservative Members as being that prison works, because there is much more to it than that. The argument has not been made that prison does not work. I do not want to labour the point, but tougher sentencing has resulted in a demonstrable fall in crime. That fall has coincided with a palpable change in sentencing policy.

There has been a change in culture, which is evident when politicians on both sides of the House talk about crime, responsibility and the causes of crime. I had a ringside seat in 1992-93 when I was a special adviser to the then Home Secretary, my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke). When we moved into the Home Office in 1992, we were warned by people whom I would broadly describe as on the right of the political spectrum that we would face a liberal conspiracy. It was said that a large part of the criminal justice establishment, some senior Home Office officials, the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders and the Howard League for Penal Reform were Guardian-reading, nut-cutlet-eating, open-toed sandal-wearing—*[Interruption.]* This is a caricature. It was a widely held view that there was a liberal conspiracy to frustrate Conservative law and order policies. *[Interruption.]* The Minister of State may laugh, but I am describing the caricature: this is not necessarily my own view. It was a caricature, but it was not far off.

Many of the initiatives that the then Home Secretary wanted to take were frustrated. They were met with ill-concealed opposition from many civil servants and voluntary bodies. I could give hon. Members a long list of examples. For instance, little progress was made on the proposal for secure training centres, much to the annoyance of my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe. The proposal in the Criminal Justice Act 1993 that gave courts the power to take into account previous convictions when setting sentences was fiercely contested, as were provisions to introduce mandatory sentences for bail banditry and to make it an aggravating factor in any offence.

Ms Abbott: I cannot let those remarks about Home Office professionals pass. There is not, and never has been, a liberal conspiracy in the Home Office—merely people who have to deal with the facts and with the nitty-gritty of containing vast numbers of people. They have to look further than the next conference speech.

Mr. Ruffley: If a liberal conspiracy truly existed, it has now come to an end. The new Home Secretary has taken on board lock, stock and barrel the tough law and order rhetoric—*[Interruption.]* The Minister shakes his head, but he knows as well as I do that the Home Secretary, in a well-publicised visit to New York, looked at radical and—dare I say it—right-wing law and order initiatives.

The Minister of State, Home Department (Mr. Paul Boateng) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Ruffley: The Minister dissents, but I am sure that he will not dispute the fact that the Home Secretary talked about getting squeegee merchants off the streets and about zero tolerance. That is a measure of the progress that the Conservative Administration made. We turned the tide, and made it acceptable to talk tough on law and order. The best evidence for that proposition is the language that the Home Secretary now uses, even if the Minister of State does not. Those are the facts.

7.8 pm

Mr. James Clappison (Hertsmere): This has been a good debate. I congratulate the Committee and its Chairman on their choice of this important subject for an inquiry, which has led to the debate. I recognise that much hard work has been put into the report. We have heard some interesting contributions, not least from my hon. Friends the Members for Woking (Mr. Malins) for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) and for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley) and my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier). There have been interesting speeches from hon. Members on both sides of the House. The Chairman of the Committee, the hon. Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), did the House a service by opening the debate in a balanced way.

This is an important subject, because we need community sentences and alternatives to prison sentences that are effective and credible, and command the respect of sentencers and the public. To command respect, those sentences must be used in appropriate cases. They need to be tough, and must not be seen as a soft option. I apologise to the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) for using the word "tough", but, in this context, I do not think that it will grab the tabloid headlines. Those sentences should, as far as possible, be rehabilitative.

Contrary to what may be believed in some quarters, the previous Government were, in my view, responsible for some creditable achievements in regard to community sentences. As the Select Committee noted, the Criminal Justice Act 1991 supplies the general framework for sentencing. The Act was not the perfect article when it was introduced; it needed some refinement, which it received. We heard some interesting observations from my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St. Edmunds about the background to that refinement. Today, however, the Act is generally accepted, and was accepted by the Committee, as an appropriate framework.

It must be right for the public to be protected from people who commit serious offences, and those who put the public at risk of grave harm as a result of violent or sexual offences must be given long prison sentences. I was interested by much of the speech of the hon. Member for Colchester (Mr. Russell), but I must gently demur from what he said about what determines prison numbers. I believe that they should be determined by what is needed

to protect the public, rather than by any sort of international comparison or international league table. The protection of the public should be paramount.

When offences do not fall into the categories that I have described, the public, and sentencers, should feel confident about community sentences. It should be recognised, however, that even less serious offences—offences that do not fall into the categories outlined in the Criminal Justice Act—which sentencers do not consider call for immediate custodial sentences, are nevertheless serious in themselves. They are serious for members of the public in general and, in particular, for the victims. Members of the public, and specifically victims, need to be reassured that community sentences are effective and tough.

In recent years, we have seen a good deal of what I consider to be toughening of established community sentences. For instance, national standards for probation have been introduced. We have also seen the introduction—which I welcome—of new community sentences: new options for sentencers, and greater flexibility for them. Let me give two examples. Combination orders, to which the Committee referred, combine probation and community service. In paragraph 28, the Committee said of the orders:

"First used in 1992, their use has increased each year since then."

That is because they have been seen to be effective in practice.

The other example, which has been mentioned in the debate, is that of curfew orders with electronic monitoring. Those orders, which have been pioneered in recent years, amount to a real deprivation of liberty for offenders, falling short of imprisonment. They require offenders to be in a certain place—usually their homes—for a certain length of time, and to be subject to electronic monitoring to ensure that happens. The orders have been given trials in three areas, and are now being extended to more. There is evidence—which the Committee identified—that they are seen as tough and effective. Perhaps the best evidence came from the deputy justices' clerk who said—he is quoted in paragraph 161 of the Committee's report—that the toughness of the disposal was shown by

"the reluctance of solicitors to propose it as a sentencing option for their clients."

That is indeed good evidence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot reminded us gently of the background to the introduction of electronic monitoring, and the advice that we received from certain quarters when it was introduced. I do not want to go too far down that road, but I recall that we received certain advice based on considerations of not just practicability but principle—as my hon. Friend rightly said.

We must enter one reservation about the proposed use of electronic monitoring today. We welcome the use of home curfew as a sentence in its own right, but not as a way of securing the release of those who have been sentenced to imprisonment. We feel—we made our view known during the passage of the Crime and Disorder Bill—that it cuts across the principle of honesty in sentencing: the principle that sentences should mean what they say. We fear that the use of home curfew in this way will affect public confidence in sentencing.

Let me now deal briefly with alternative community sentences for three particularly important groups of offenders. First, let me discuss female offenders, who have already been mentioned today. The Committee noted that the female proportion of the prison population has been growing, and that growth has accelerated recently. In paragraph 225, it noted

"the importance of providing alternatives to prison, and probation programmes in particular, which tackle the problems presented by women offenders specifically."

We welcome the Committee's attitude. The increase in the number of women in prison must be a matter of public concern. We note what the Government have said in their response, and we encourage their pathfinder programmes, but we hope that they will take the problem of women offenders seriously, and will consider what more can be done about it.

Another important category of offenders is drug misusers, whom my hon. Friend the Member for Woking rightly described as the biggest problem in the criminal justice system. Anyone who comes into much contact with the system will be driven to the same conclusion. Drug misuse is a serious matter. The Committee referred to the alarming extent of crime related to drug abuse. Its members visited Dumbarton, where they saw the despair that is caused by drug misuse and drug-related crime. Unhappily, they could have observed similar scenes in many other places throughout the United Kingdom.

In their response, the Government referred to a drug treatment and testing order, but that will not be fully available until 2000-01, and then only in the case of relatively serious offences. We think that there is good sense in the Committee's recommendation

"that the Government make it an objective that all drug misusing offenders given community sentences have access to appropriate treatment."

It must be sensible to make treatment as widely available as possible where it is needed.

Another important subject is that of young offenders. We feel that there should be appropriate alternatives to custody, some of them tailor made for young offenders. My hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot made some good points about that. We all want good schemes that give youngsters self-confidence. I note that the Committee reached similar conclusions on a subject that is something of an interest of mine. In paragraph 191, it says that it

"must note the continuing concerns raised by sentencers that there is inadequate provision of secure places for young offenders . . . Although a programme to expand the number of places was put in hand by the previous Government, the Home Office has estimated that the new places will not be sufficient to meet the demand."

I do not wish to introduce too discordant a note at this late stage, but I know that the Minister of State had some responsibility in this regard in his last ministerial job. I believe it was the Minister of State who told me, in a written answer, that the Government had provided six additional places for young offenders so far. Let me alert him to the fact that we shall be taking an interest in the subject. The Committee was right to note that sentencers are concerned about it.

The general issue of community sentences is important. We want constructive and effective alternatives to custodial sentences, which are substantive and sound in practice. The Committee did a great deal of work, and we recognise that. We note that the background is the "what works" debate. At this late stage, I shall not embark on a detailed evaluation of reconviction rates and what has been done in that regard, but I think I am entitled to make

[Mr. James Clappison]

one observation: the background is a falling crime rate. We want the rate to continue to fall, and we think that community sentences can make a contribution. We want sentences that command the confidence of sentencers and the public, and do not represent a soft option.

This is a worthwhile process of building on what has been achieved in the past, and we look forward to the toughening of community sentences in the future.

7.19 pm

The Minister of State, Home Office (Mr. Paul Boateng): This has been an excellent debate. It has been good-humoured and utterly lacking in party political rancour, except for a little deviation at the end from the hon. Member for Bury St. Edmunds (Mr. Ruffley), who started yapping a bit. Apart from that, it has been good-humoured and well-informed, as well it might because we have been considering important work from a Select Committee that has done the House a great service through the careful and considered way in which it has approached the subject.

The Select Committee has endorsed much of what the Government have already done and taken forward with the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 but—this is important—it has also highlighted some areas to which we and, indeed, the nation need to give greater attention. That is particularly welcome. Those issues are not a matter simply for Government. They need to engage the whole community as we move in partnership to contain and to reduce crime and criminality.

We should be under no illusions about the subject. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland, South (Mr. Mullin), who chairs the Select Committee with such distinction, made it clear that the Committee as a whole—each member of the Committee who has spoken has given weight to the proposition—recognises that what is needed is rigour: intellectual rigour and a rigorous approach to disposals, whether prison or alternatives to prison. What we cannot have is a situation in which we do not recognise that intervention needs to be targeted, tough—we make no apology for using that word—and effective.

Mr. Ruffley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Boateng: No, I will not give way.

We are about reflecting society's determination that we should have a criminal justice system that recognises a place for punishment and retribution, and that punishment and retribution go alongside rehabilitation and reform. Unless we have a balance between the two, we are unlikely to succeed.

I make two important points in response to the debate. First, in talking about alternatives to imprisonment, we need to recognise that sentencing is, properly, dealt with by the courts. Many offenders can be dealt with in the community, which should be encouraged where appropriate, but there will always be some for whom prison is the most appropriate punishment. They must find that punishment at the hands of our courts.

The point has been made, not least by the hon. Member for Woking (Mr. Malins) and the hon. and learned Member for Harborough (Mr. Garnier), who have first-hand experience of the sentencing process, that the courts do not take that duty lightly. They wish to consider a range of alternatives in sentencing. It is important that we should assist them by ensuring that they have that range. The Government have with alacrity set about the task of giving them scope for making the most appropriate disposal.

We recognise that there is a job to be done, as the Select Committee has said, to ensure that the people who are responsible for sentencing are properly informed about the range of sentences open to them. It does not necessarily require—although, as the Lord Chief Justice suggested, it can be of assistance to the sentencer, whether a stipendiary, a lay magistrate or a judge in the Crown court—a visit to the centre of alternative disposal. It is possible for sentencers to be informed in other ways. We plan to issue guidance in the new year about the role of probation staff who work in courts to enable them to include advice to sentencers, providing them with the necessary information and statistics about the probation programmes that are available locally. We look to them to use that information.

Secondly, we have to ensure that we give courts the powers that they need. That is why we have introduced new measures in the Crime and Disorder Act to enable courts to deal more effectively with young offenders. We have also introduced measures such as the drug treatment and testing order.

We believe that it is important to ensure that, in prisons, there is a regime that does all that it possibly can not only to keep drugs out—that is why we emphasise creating in some prisons completely drug-free wings, where it is possible to provide the necessary alternative treatments to counteract offending—but to educate prisoners to enable them to come to terms with the drug misuse that led to their being there in the first place.

That must not be a soft option. It is a testing option for those who submit themselves to those programmes. It is important that entry into the programmes is voluntary, because otherwise people do not have the motivation to come to grips with their drug problem.

The Government are determined to ensure that those who offend against society, whether they are in prison or have been given an alternative sentence, face up to their offending behaviour in the first place, and recognise that they need to equip themselves with the means to play a full, constructive and honest part in society.

It is great pity that the debate is constrained by time, because I should like to comment more on the important points that have been raised, but let me briefly go through some of them. The Select Committee rightly emphasised the importance of effective, evidence-based practice. That is why, when, for example, we look at the role of restorative justice as an alternative to custody, we build on the research evidence that is being gathered, for example, in the Thames Valley police area. Real progress is being made in developing restorative justice to make it clear that it is not a soft option.

Anyone who talks to the chief constable of Thames Valley police gets the clearest impression that he is absolutely committed, as are the justices in his area, to ensuring that young people, in particular, face up to the offending behaviour that got them there and do not, as they all too often do in youth courts, shelter behind lawyers, with those young people and their parents not confronting the offending behaviour.

It is important to develop a joint system within the Prison Service. That is part of an action programme that includes several other aspects. It is about the accreditation of programmes that are available in prison to combat offending. It is also important to ensure that we work with the probation service to guarantee that those who are sentenced to community service recognise that, where they breach that service, they will certainly return to court, so that they can be disposed of in a more appropriate way. A community service order must not be seen as getting away with it. I accept that a strong case has been made for renaming the order, and we are actively considering that.

I hope that, from my brief response, members of the Select Committee, who have worked so hard on the report, will have a sense of our determination to take the issues forward.

I had the pleasure of going with my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) to a young offenders secure installation that is run by the Department of Health in his constituency. That installation is addressing the very issue of ensuring that courts have available to them places in which intensive intervention in the lives of those young people is possible. Very many of the young people in such installations are damaged, and come from homes in which they simply have not had a chance. Moreover, they have been failed repeatedly not only by the criminal justice system but by social services and an array of agencies that should have been working to ensure that they did not offend initially.

Across Departments, the Government's commitment is to ensure that we learn the lesson of early intervention that is taught by the Home Affairs Committee's report. We shall learn that and other lessons. Together, in the spirit that the Committee has demonstrated, we can and shall make a difference.

Question deferred, pursuant to paragraph (4) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates).

Class 1, Vote 1

New Deal

[Relevant Documents: Seventh Report from the Education and Employment Committee of Session 1997–98, on Pathways into Work for Lone Parents, HC646, and the Government's response thereto, HC1122; Eighth report from the Education and Employment Committee of Session 1997–98, on New Deal Pathfinders, HC1059, and the Government's response thereto, HC1123; Department for Education and Employment and Office for Standards in Education Departmental Report: The Government's Expenditure Plans 1998–99, Cm3910.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That a sum, not exceeding £6,826,077,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2000 for expenditure by the Department for Education and Employment on voluntary and special schools; the Assisted Places Scheme; the provision of education for under-fives; City Colleges and other specialist schools; grant-maintained schools and schools conducted by Education Associations; music and ballet schools; the school curriculum and its assessment; the youth service and other educational services and initiatives; careers guidance and services; payments for or in connection with teacher training; higher and further education provision and initiatives; loans to students, student awards and other student grants and their administration; the payment of access funds; reimbursement of fees for qualifying European Community students; compensation payments to teachers and staff of certain institutions; expenditure on other central government grants to local authorities; the provision of training and assessment programmes for young people and adults; initiatives to improve training and qualifications arrangements and access to these; the promotion of enterprise and the encouragement of self employment; payments for education, training and employment projects assisted by the European Community and refunds to the European Community; events associated with the UK presidency of the EU; the UK subscription to the ILO; help for unemployed people; the promotion of equal opportunities, disability rights, childcare provision and co-ordination of certain issues of particular importance to women; the payment of certain fees to the Home Office; the Department's own administration and research and that of Capita; information and publicity services; expenditure via Training and Enterprise Councils and amounts retained by them as surpluses and spent by them on training; other initiatives within their articles and memoranda of association; expenditure in connection with the sale of the student loans debt; and on expenditure in connection with the Welfare to Work Programme and Millennium Volunteers.—[*Mr. Andrew Smith.*]

7.31 pm

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): I am delighted to be able to speak in this debate, and should like to thank the Liaison Committee for choosing to refer to the Education and Employment Committee's two reports.

My next task is to praise the members of my Committee. As a veteran talent spotter within the parliamentary Labour party, I have never seen such an array of current and future stars—and that includes the Liberal Democrat Members and our Conservative colleague, the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady), who unfortunately cannot attend this debate as he is attending his child's carol service. All Committee members have an enormous amount to contribute, and I am very proud to chair the Committee.

We should like also to thank the Chancellor for giving us £5 billion in this Parliament with which to advance the flagship new deals. It is at least £5 billion more than was provided by the previous Government.

[Mr. Derek Foster]

I should like to thank the Secretary of State for Education and Employment and the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities for creating a listening and learning Department.

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): Before the right hon. Gentleman concludes his thanks, should he not also thank the utilities that provided the money so that the new deal could start initially?

Mr. Foster: I cannot thank them, because they did not want to part with the money. We made them do so—and there is the difference between Labour and Liberal Democrat.

As I said, I should like to thank the Secretary of State and the Minister for creating such a listening Department. All our experience—I think that it is shared by hon. Members from every party—is that reasonable suggestions made to either the Secretary of State or the Minister are listened to and examined. Moreover, if they are practicable and sensible, they are likely to be implemented. That is not true in all Departments.

Mr. Willetts: Which ones?

Mr. Foster: I shall not name them today, but may go into a different mode on a different occasion.

I praise the liberation of the Employment Service. I was one of those who felt initially that the Employment Service—the agent of the harsh benefits system—was the wrong agency to be implementing the new deal. I doubted that that agency knew anything about being a sharing and caring organisation that could help younger and older people to negotiate all the difficulties of education and learning. However, I was wrong. The Employment Service—with its very able chief executive, Leigh Lewis—has through its 35,000 staff implemented a culture change. Those staff have been liberated from implementing a harsh benefit regime to doing what they enjoy doing: assisting people in finding work.

The welfare-to-work programme is absolutely central to reforming the welfare state. Moreover, getting people into jobs or training and developing them—whether they are in or out of work—is central to the Government's excellent supply-side measures. Reform of the welfare state and supply-side measures together should yield far more employable people—who are far more able to get a job, to keep a job and to find another job if they lose the first one.

I should like to mention Robert Reich, who hon. Members will know was Bill Clinton's previous Secretary of Labour. He said that running a successful economy and generating jobs was a bit like a three-legged stool. The first leg was to have a sufficient number of employable people; the second was to have an abundance of adaptable organisations; and the third was to have adequate demand. The three goals are mutually reinforcing and interdependent, and they must be pursued simultaneously. The Government are trying to do that. They are not always succeeding, but they are certainly trying.

If the new deal for 18 to 24-year-olds, the new deal for those over 25, the new deal for lone parents and the new deal for disabled people all succeed—I believe that they will; they have certainly made a very good start—we will end up with many more employable people, thereby enabling the economy to run at a higher growth rate than otherwise would have been possible.

Similarly, we will be able to respond to rapidly changing market opportunities if we succeed in making all our companies—global companies, small and medium-sized enterprises, and micro-employment and self-employment—more adaptable by investing in research and development; by energising a culture of innovation; by training, developing and properly managing staff; and by being entrepreneurial, which is a very rare skill about which most us know nothing. If we succeed in creating such adaptable organisations, we will also enable our economy to grow much faster than would otherwise be possible.

In the past few years, the United States of America—to which we tend to look—has created millions of jobs by making people employable and creating adaptable organisations. Nevertheless, Robert Reich eloquently said that, although they created millions of jobs, many of those were "crap" jobs. Although that is not the type of language that I usually use—he said it, not me—he was right.

I do not want to deal with the demand side of the equation, as that would tempt me to deal with the issues at far greater length.

I shall deal now with the two reports on which this debate is centred. Hon. Members who have read "New Deal Pathfinders" will see that our recommendations are on pages 24 to 27. I should like to mention just two of them. The first is recommendation 2, about personal advisers, and the second is recommendation 10 on the take-up by employers.

The personal adviser is rapidly becoming the agent of transformation of the Employment Service. The Committee wants that pursued vigorously and rigorously throughout the new deal, particularly if the responsibility of that personal adviser begins before a person's entry into the new deal and continues throughout its course and for some time after. If a continuity of support and advice is available, people will have more success in entering the labour market and staying in it.

In Australia, we discovered that the father of the new deal—the working nation—failed to a certain extent because the commitment of the private sector was not engaged. The Government have been extraordinarily wise in getting private employers signed up so readily. They went for the global players first—the people with the big reputations whom everyone looks up to. That enabled the small and medium enterprises to follow through.

The Government have been more successful than I expected. Some 30,000 employers have already signed up. The Employment Service has increased its market share to upwards of 32 per cent. In Australia, the figure was only 20 per cent. It is remarkable that a publicly led employment service has managed to secure 32 per cent. of the market and rising, whereas the private-led employment service in Australia has only 20 per cent. at the moment, although that could, and probably will, change.

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): The right hon. Gentleman is talking about the important issue of

employer involvement in the new deal. I am sure that he is aware of the letter from Chris Humphries, the director general of the British chambers of commerce, who says:

"Many companies report little or no contact from the Employment Service and so a severe lack of information . . . is magnifying their confusion and leading to significant disillusionment."

I should be interested in the right hon. Gentleman's comments on those concerns expressed by employers.

Mr. Foster: I have a high regard for Chris Humphries and I shall take that comment seriously. More important, my right hon. Friend the Minister has heard the comment. I am sure that he will take it seriously, and will do what he can to rectify the problem.

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Foster: I have no time. I am sorry, but I have to finish in two minutes if I am going to keep faith with my colleagues. I should love to be able to give way, but I must finish shortly.

The recommendations on the lone parents scheme are on pages xlii to xlvi. There is a helpful summary of them on page xlii in paragraphs 1 and 2. I want to mention two elements briefly. The first is education and training, which we considered immensely important. We found the Government's response dismissive—if I may say so kindly to my right hon. Friend the Minister—and we think that they are mistaken. We want to get lone parents out of the poverty pay market. There is no virtue in them being locked into poverty pay, because they would be only marginally better off than if they had not joined the labour market. We want to create ladders of opportunity that they can climb up, allowing them to progress and have more income, better opportunities and better jobs. Education and training is the secret to that.

My final point—well, I shall make another if I have time—is transport. In all the new deals that we have examined, it quickly became clear that the ability of people to get to where the job opportunities were was crucial to the success of the schemes and of the labour market.

One of the acid tests of the new deals is whether they have street cred. It does not matter what we think. What matters is what the people concerned think, particularly the young people. If they write the schemes off, they will not succeed. At the moment, that is not happening.

The other acid tests are how the schemes cope with the disadvantaged and how they cope with ethnic minorities. What I have seen so far does not impress me greatly. The Government are trying to deal with the problems. Young people from the ethnic minorities have a far greater share of unemployment than the rest of society. Dealing with that is a big challenge for the Government.

I thank the House for listening to my rather poor speech. I look forward to hearing the other contributions.

7.46 pm

Mr. Paul Keetch (Hereford): I am delighted to follow what was not a poor speech but an excellent one by the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster). As the only Opposition member of the Select Committee present, I thank him for the courtesy that he gives to me and the other members. He may be surrounded by rising stars—I see one or two next to him and behind him—but I am sure that his star is not yet in decline.

The problems and hardships of lone parents are considerable. The Liberal Democrats recognise how the new deal affects them. I shall be brief in my contribution to this short debate, because I want as many people as possible to have the chance to speak. I shall concentrate on the new deal for young people and specifically the results from the pathfinder areas.

There are direct and indirect lessons from the experience of the pathfinder areas. Some of those lessons have not yet been addressed by the Government. The report is old and time has moved on, but I hope that the Minister will respond to three specific points.

The first was mentioned by the right hon. Gentleman in his closing remarks. People from ethnic minority backgrounds have made relatively poor progress under the new deal. During the Select Committee's visits to the west midlands in March, I asked about the participation rates among the ethnic minorities. At a meeting at Bilston college, people from 20 or so social groups from a wide range of areas came to talk to us. I asked them, in their judgment, what percentage of people from the black and Afro-Caribbean communities bothered to sign up to the jobseeker's allowance. Was it 70 per cent.? Was it 60 per cent.? They told me that in their experience less than 50 per cent. of young people from the ethnic minorities bothered to sign up for the jobseeker's allowance. That means that 50 per cent. are excluded from any help under the new deal.

Such schemes are of value only if they help those most at risk of exclusion from the labour market. It is easy to design employment schemes to get middle-class, well-to-do white people back to work. We have to judge schemes by how they affect those most at risk. If the new deal fails such groups, it will be no better than its predecessors.

I welcome the Government's decision to provide fuller statistical information on the progress of ethnic minorities in the new deal and beyond, as long as that involves producing initial survey material on those who are not claiming the jobseeker's allowance as well as those who are. We need to know what is happening to them.

The Lambeth pathfinder has a large percentage of people from ethnic minorities. I drew the area to the Minister's attention in an oral question on 19 November. I pointed out the poor progress of young people from Lambeth in the subsidised employment option. Discrimination is an easy accusation to make, but difficult to prove. However, there is worrying evidence that employers are more reluctant to offer subsidised jobs to young people from the ethnic minorities than to people from the white community. In his reply, the Minister tried to reassure me that the glass was "half full". That is no comfort to those who find themselves in the empty part of the glass.

Ms Abbott: Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the same problem affected the old Manpower Services Commission programmes? Employers were unwilling to take on black young people even when they were well qualified, so they tended to be shoved into the voluntary sector. We have to be particularly watchful and prevent that from happening under the new deal.

Mr. Keetch: The hon. Lady is right. I have one or two proposals that might solve that problem.

[Mr. Keetch]

It is no comfort to those in the empty half of the glass, especially if the Employment Service monitors only half the number of young, black unemployed people who register for the jobseeker's allowance. If the Department is still only considering setting up an employer database that could tell us where the subsidised vacancies were and the number of starts on the employment option by employer, how can we identify best practice and improve the scheme? How can we ensure that the glass will ever be full? As long as members of the ethnic minorities have only a 50 per cent. chance of obtaining subsidised employment in Lambeth or in any inner city, the new deal will be no deal for them.

The first essential step is to collect the right information which must then be used to combat bias in the system. We want a scheme that works for the long-term unemployed. We do not want to pretend that half a glass is enough.

My second concern is the cost of the scheme. I am talking not about the so-called costings produced by the Conservative party, which is not known for its book-keeping, but about the discrepancy between the replies that my hon. Friends and I have received from the Minister.

In May, I was given costed options—other than the subsidised employment option—of about £4,000 per person. Last month, my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Mr. Foster) received a reply costing them at £2,600 per person. Only yesterday my noble Friend Lord Tope was informed by the Minister of State in the other place that the cost was only £1,000 per person. Last week the Minister of State told the Select Committee that that was a result of the contracting process. Yesterday in another place we heard a slightly different tale. Does any Minister in the Department know the answer?

The Select Committee would have had a better idea and a better view of the progress of the pathfinder areas, had more information about costing in general and the contracting process in particular been made available. For example, the Government have finally released the specification document in respect of the new deal pilots for the over-25s on which all those tendering for the work based their bids. I have it here. In that document, the Government make it clear to potential bidders that £1,300 per person is being made available. I do not recall the Committee being shown a similar document for the new deal for young people. If such a specification was produced, I suggest that the Minister places a copy in the Library. Perhaps he could also refer to it and let us know the figure. Was it £4,000, £2,600 or £1,000?

Thirdly, I want to refer to the planning assumptions on which the scheme was based. The specification for the over-25 pilots shows just how limited the Government's ambitions really are. It states quite clearly that the pilots should do "at least" as well as the labour market would do by itself. That is hardly the "new beginning for Britain" that the Secretary of State for Education and Employment promised when he launched the new deal in 1997.

After seeing the result of the pathfinder areas, the Liberal Democrats have yet to be convinced that the new deal programme will meet the claims made by Ministers or, more importantly, the needs of those whom it was designed to help.

In his response to the Centre for Policy Studies, the Minister of State said that the Government should not claim the new deal a success too soon. I could not agree more.

7.54 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney, North and Stoke Newington): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in tonight's important debate, because the new deal is a flagship programme for the Government. I take a keen interest partly because my constituency in Hackney has the highest unemployment rate in the south-east. It has particular problems with structural unemployment. The new deal must work in inner-city constituencies such as Hackney and Brixton and in Manchester and Birmingham or it will not have delivered.

I have been in correspondence with the Minister about the new deal programme since last autumn and before that with his predecessor. This evening I want to touch briefly on three issues: the wider economic context in which the Government are attempting to roll out the new deal, the role of Reed as a private-sector partner in Hackney, and the particular issues relating to black young people. I congratulate the Select Committee on its important and interesting recommendations. I hope that Ministers will read the report again, and provide a more positive response on those issues.

Let me start by addressing the wider economic context. The new deal can deliver on the hopes and aspirations that are riding on it only in the context of economic growth. It seems a long time since the Labour party spoke in terms of full employment. Ministers may sneer, but only full employment will combat the structural unemployment in Hackney and elsewhere in inner London and get people back to work. Unless the Government set full employment as their goal, many of the hopes resting on the new deal programme will remain just that.

Certain aspects of the Government's economic policy—their monetary policy and the limits on public expenditure that account for poor public sector participation in the new deal—cause me concern. Anyone who mentions economic slowdown is accused of talking down the economy, but the manufacturing sectors are in recession and in time they will carry the rest of the economy in that direction.

I make those points to stress that on its own the new deal is not enough. It must operate in the context of economic growth, and certain aspects of the Government's economic policy give rise to concern about the prospects for growth.

I was particularly keen to speak tonight because Hackney is one of the two initial pathfinder areas with a private sector partner, Reed, for the new deal. I have no principled objections to a private sector partner. I share the reservations of some of my colleagues about whether the Employment Service is the best vehicle to deliver the new deal and there is no doubt that fresh thinking and fresh ideas are needed.

I have worked closely with Reed in Hackney on the new deal. The team led by Chris Melvin comprises pleasant, approachable young men who seem eager to do their best, but the role of Reed in relation to the new deal in Hackney is problematic. Reed was a major donor to the party and Alex Reed is an adviser to the Department. In February, when I asked the Reed team about the process

of tendering, those nice young men said, "We did not tender on costs, but on the originality of our ideas." As someone who has worked in local authorities and knows how the tendering process works, I have never heard of a tender being awarded on that basis. When I asked those young men what was the value of the contract, they said, "We are still in negotiation on that."

I have asked Ministers for more details about the tendering process. Although I do not expect a response tonight, I should like to know the value of the contract. I would prefer not to be fobbed off by arguments about commercial confidentiality. In awarding a contract to a group that makes big donations to the party, we must be like Caesar's wife—above reproach. We need greater transparency on Reed's involvement, the value of the contract and how the tender worked.

Having received the contract in Hackney, Reed has won a series of new deal contracts. Although the people from Reed are pleasant and enthusiastic, they have yet to meet their own targets for putting people into work in Hackney, so it is strange that they should have been offered contracts in other areas.

I am glad to have this opportunity to speak about issues relating to ethnic minorities, which, as other hon. Members have said, will be important in judging the success of the new deal. I remind those hon. Members who represent suburban or rural constituencies that do not have the ethnic minority populations of inner-city areas that, in London, the level of unemployment for young black males between the ages of 18 and 24 is approaching two thirds. I live in my constituency and with the consequences of those high levels of unemployment—the hopelessness and anger, and the social and, yes, criminal problems.

If I have been persistent on the new deal and a nuisance to the Minister—and to the former Member for Enfield, North—it is because I feel so strongly about the ramifications of the high levels of unemployment, particularly among young black males. I accept that suggestions are now being made on how the new deal could tackle ethnic minority issues and that the Select Committee has made some interesting recommendations, but I regret that a concern for those issues was not, from the outset, built into the way in which the new deal programme was structured.

When the contract was put out for tender in Hackney, for example, there was no specific requirement for expertise in and understanding of ethnic minority issues, and no one from the ethnic minorities was put on the selection panel. It would have been better if an understanding of those issues and of the structural problems had been required from the beginning; instead, we have belatedly to employ working parties and consultants.

There is a danger that we are re-inventing the wheel. Those of us who worked in the community sector and in local authorities in the inner cities in the 1970s and 1980s know the difficulties of attracting young black people to such projects, of engaging them in those projects and of putting them in work. In their enthusiasm to be new and modern and to reach out to the private sector, the Government have ignored the wealth of knowledge and expertise among long-standing party members, albeit old Labour party members.

Mr. Derek Foster: My hon. Friend makes some valid points, which were put to us when we went to—if I may use the expression—the black country. Those hon. Members, including me, who do not have many members of the ethnic minorities in their constituencies, misunderstand the vigour and richness of the community life of black and Asian people, just as people often misunderstood the vigour and richness of the mining communities. One has to live in an area to experience such qualities. Does she agree that part of the problem is a failure of communication?

Ms Abbott: Yes. I have had to draw Reed's attention to the existence of groups and networks. Indeed, I was surprised that Reed won the contract, as it does not have an office in Hackney; its knowledge of labour market conditions there is limited. As I said, the Reed people are pleasant and enthusiastic young men who are willing to learn. However, Reed put into Hackney a team that was all white and that had no experience of the area. Instead of bringing in experienced Reed staff, who at least would have had some knowledge of and contacts in the private sector, it recruited fresh people to deliver the new deal programme. Hackney had the down side of private sector involvement but not the up side—specialist recruiters and job placement people. Unless one lives in these places, it is easy not to understand the community's richness.

Some of the people to whom the Committee spoke were dismissive of local organisations, but those organisations know their communities. They know why young black people may be unwilling to sign on and why they may be cynical; they know of the small ethnic minority businesses that may be able to deliver for the new deal. I regret that some of those issues were not built in to the new deal in the beginning. I regret that, in putting out tenders to organisations such as Reed, the Government did not include more specific stipulations to work in partnership with ethnic minority and other voluntary organisations with real knowledge of the communities. I am glad that statistics are now being collected, but a new deal programme that fails young black people in Hackney will fail all people in Hackney; it will fail to engage with some of the most pernicious problems of social exclusion in society.

I refer to two recommendations in the Select Committee report to which I do not believe the Government have given an adequate response. Recommendation 21 suggests that capacity-building funds could be provided for some ethnic minority organisations. I ask the Government to reconsider that, as organisations—even black and Asian small businesses—exist that would take on new deal trainees. The Government must be more creative in engaging directly—not through consultants and experts—with the black and Asian community and with black and Asian businesses, which have a big role to play in the new deal. In the Hackneys, the Brixtons, the Moss Sides, the Handsworths, the only businesses—with the exception of the Sainsbury's and the big retailers—are small ethnic minority businesses. Again, if the new deal is not proactive in the inner city in involving ethnic minority businesses, it will not put our young people, black and white, back to work.

I am also sorry that the Government dismissed recommendation 22, in which the Select Committee suggested a survey of unregistered unemployment. It is precisely because black young people are not on the electoral register that no one knows how many there are. I am sure that my hon. and long-standing Friend the

[Ms Abbott]

Member for Tottenham (Mr. Grant) would say this even more vehemently—our perception, as people who have lived, who have been brought up and who have worked in these communities, is that the proportion of black youngsters who do not register even for the jobseeker's allowance is vast. Until the Government survey, unregistered unemployment—I shall say this in the House on every opportunity that I have—they will not deal with social exclusion, the issue that the new deal is supposed to tackle. What is the point of a new deal that gets X per cent. of black youngsters to work if the majority of black youngsters are not even in contact with the Employment Service?

Mr. Keetch: The hon. Lady will have heard me cite the figure—around 50 per cent.—that was given to us at Bilston. Given her vast experience in this matter, will she give her estimate of what the figure really is?

Ms Abbott: The Government dismissed that estimate. I do not want to get into estimates, but my guess—and my hon. Friend the Member for Tottenham says the same—is that, for a variety of reasons, more black youngsters, particularly young males—I could talk at length about the issues relating to young black males—do not register than register. That is why it is so important to conduct a survey. If the survey proves me wrong, all well and good—I shall stop harping on the issue—but I am frightened that Ministers will say that the new deal programme is a success, even though, as those of us who live in Hackney, Tottenham and Brixton will know, thousands of young men continue to live on estates, idle and hopeless.

The new deal is a flagship programme. In an area such as Hackney with terrible unemployment—and the terrible social problems that go with that—a lot is riding on the new deal. It is relatively easy to have a new deal programme that works on paper. It is harder to have a new deal programme that really works—and, in particular, a new deal programme that works in the type of community that I represent.

The Select Committee has done good work, and I support all the recommendations. I have spoken mainly about two because of the problems of time. I know that the Minister has taken steps on the question of ethnic minority communities with high unemployment—I know because I have been to see him more than once—but there is more to be done.

It gives me no pleasure to raise the issue of Reed, but it is time for transparency about the way in which it obtained the contract, and about how much it is obtaining from that and other contracts. We can carry no credibility unless our relationships with such corporate donors is wholly transparent and completely above reproach.

In closing, I congratulate Ministers, who have pursued the new deal programme with much enthusiasm and commitment—although they have not engaged some of the issues that I would like addressed. I congratulate the Select Committee, which has produced a useful and important report. However, many eyes are watching the new deal—some of those eyes do not even know that that is what they are watching. For a community such as mine, much rides on the programme. I am anxious to work constructively with Ministers, with Reed in Hackney and with any colleagues who share my interests to make sure that this programme delivers for all our people.

8.12 pm

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): I agree wholeheartedly with many of the important points made by my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), who brought to life the Committee's recommendations on ethnic minority communities. I hope that the Minister will respond to those points, and that we have a continuing dialogue.

I wish to illustrate some of the positive aspects of the new deal by talking about individual examples. The Committee Chairman, the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), gave an excellent introduction—in spite of his protests—in which he spoke of the broad context of the new deal, and of our recommendations. However, talking about individuals brings the subject to life.

Half of my constituency is in the southern Derbyshire pathfinder area, and I shall refer to examples from my area. I also wish to refer to examples given to me last night over coffee, when I was talking to hon. Members who are unable to be here tonight. I shall start in Plymouth, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Devonport (Mr. Jamieson) was at a conference a couple of weeks ago. I have read some extremely positive quotes from the conference of the new deal providers and the personal advisers, who said:

"Everyone deserves a pat on the back . . . Achievement even within short time-scale . . . New Dealers feel they 'own' New Deal . . . New Deal clients feel they are getting more opportunities . . . New Deal is 'a foot in the door' . . . the ambassadors are the New Dealers themselves."

I have spoken to some of the new dealers in my area in the past couple of days about the positive examples. There are many issues to be addressed—including some which have been raised tonight—but I wish to address some other issues also. The gateway is a positive part of the programme, which takes the person who is having difficulty in finding employment and looks at their needs. It does not say, "We will try to get you somewhere to go. You will go into that position and it will either work or not." The gateway looks at the needs of the individual—something that the Select Committee found to be positive.

The key issue—which was addressed by our Chairman—is the role of the personal adviser. My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton, South (Ms Taylor) gave me an example yesterday of a lone parent in her constituency whose take-home pay went up by £70 a week as soon as she got a tele-advertising job through the new deal. She said:

"I feel confident. I didn't feel anyone would take me seriously. I thought it would be one interview and then I would be left to find my own way. I have a personal adviser who is there for me all the time. They are the make or break of New Deal."

She said that she could now plan her life, and had been able to get subsidised child care, provided by the local authority. She also said:

"It's the first time I have ever been taken seriously."

That is a real condemnation of previous programmes, and it highlights a recommendation that we have been pressing on Ministers. We must ensure that there are

sufficient resources and training for the new deal personal advisers to be able to take on the role of personal mentor. That is a key part of the programme.

Another positive aspect is the role of training. I spoke yesterday—it gave me great pleasure to do so—to someone working in the Red Admiral pub in Codnor in my constituency. The pub happens to be right opposite the Conservative office in my constituency, and it is the place from which I could see that my predecessor's name, as Member of Parliament for Amber Valley, had been taken down from over the office. I spoke to Dwain Palfreyman—who was happy to have his name used—who has been unemployed, off and on, since 1994, when he got a medical discharge from the Army.

Dwain was unable to get more than odd jobs—nothing that he really liked. He was doing casual bar work at the Red Admiral—a very fine pub—and the publican said that he would like to take him on and train him up. However, he did not have the money to do so. The publican said that, because of the new deal, he was able to put the money into sending Dwain on courses. Dwain is now a licensed door supervisor, and has a national licensee's certificate. He has been on a number of courses, run by the British Institute of Innkeeping and by Bass.

Dwain said that he would not have been able to go on those courses if it were not for the money that was available through the new deal. To my delight, he is now going to be running a new bar in my town. The only thing that, worries me slightly is that, according to Dwain, it is a pub for the more mature customers—which he defined as the over-25s.

My third example concerns the experience of people being able to pursue their goals. I talked earlier today to Steven Wheatley, who is working at Prometheus Developments, down the road from where I live in Ripley. The company provides hi-tech research and development and advice in fire protection and flame-retardant materials. Steven left school at 16 with GCSEs at E grade. He has been unemployed for two years. He did a GNVQ science course, and has been taken on as a lab technician.

Steven's employer said that if he was prepared, through the training that the company was giving him—both in house and at college—to show that he was able to develop his theoretical understanding of the science and his research understanding, the company would be prepared to consider keeping him on. The company is on the point of offering him a permanent job, and he has started on a higher national certificate course at Nottingham Trent university.

The Committee recommended emphasising capacity-building for small enterprises. I have been talking to small businesses in my area, and saying that the new deal is a way in which they can take on people, see whether they can expand their business and get money for training and development. Steven had had a work trial somewhere else that did not work out. However, the company and Steven were able to try each other out and see how they did.

There are many extremely positive elements in the new deal. For the first time, people have been going out from my local employment service to the nearby industrial estate and knocking on doors. There are some difficulties, because the programme is as much client-centred as it is designed to meet employers' needs. There is some dislocation, because those who signed up expected people to come through their doors immediately, but it takes some time to process people through the gateway.

Everyone involved will have to keep a close eye on that, to ensure that, as the programme comes more on stream, employers, the voluntary and environmental providers and the task force providers get the people coming through.

Mr. Willetts: Does the hon. Lady agree that it would be helpful if the Department could provide statistics showing the number of employers who have signed up for the new deal, but have not yet taken on a single new deal participant?

Judy Mallaber: The Select Committee has been in favour of keeping statistics on every subject under the sun. We have been overwhelming people with requests for statistics. From the beginning, I have been going on and on at my local employment service to get as many and as varied opportunities as possible. In the past, I have been told of young people going to a jobcentre and being offered only work such as bricklaying—it was almost a matter of digging ditches—and being told that they will lose their benefit if they do not take it.

The whole point of the programme is to have a wide choice of opportunities so that we can meet the individual's aspirations. Steven, to whom I referred earlier, said that he was able to get other jobs but he really did not want to do them—for little money—because he knew that he wanted to be a lab technician.

There will be some dislocations, but the more statistics and information that are kept on all aspects of the programme the better, as long as we are not totally overwhelmed with figures.

Ms Abbott: Clearly there is a plethora of statistics. Does my hon. Friend agree that among the key statistics are the drop-out rate and the number of people who go through the scheme and end up with a job? In Hackney, 20 per cent. of people drop out right at the beginning, and no one knows what has happened to them; and only one in 10 of those who have gone through the new deal have actually got a job. Either the new deal gets more people into jobs than would otherwise have been the case, or it is not a success.

Judy Mallaber: I agree that it is important to keep an eye on what happens to people. We are now getting better information than in previous employment programmes. The criticism was made in South Derbyshire that about a quarter of people disappeared. Attempts are now being made to track those people down. A substantial proportion of the people who disappear have gained employment, but there is no particular reason for them to come back to the service and say so. I agree that monitoring is very important, and that is certainly happening in my area, although setting up monitoring systems is not always easy.

I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) will pursue this point, and the Committee Chairman has already referred to it: the education and training option for lone parents is very important. We were concerned that sufficient attention was not given to it in the Government's reply.

When we started to consider the new deal for lone parents, we assumed that child care would be top of the list, but the more we looked at the statistics, the more

[Judy Mallaber]

we realised that education and training were key, because graduate lone parents could get jobs much more easily. Those without qualifications had a bigger gap to bridge to pay for child care, travel and the other expenses of being in employment.

We realised that it was perfectly possible for lone parents to study and to remain on benefit, as the Government said in their response, but we wanted education and training, as a way of getting lone parents off benefits, to be given a higher profile and to be treated as a critical issue. All the evidence suggests that the way to get a decent standard of living is to get into work, that most lone parents would like to be able to work—certainly when their children are of school age—and that those who are in work would often like to be able to work a few more hours.

There are some difficulties with people not turning up to the gateway provision that has been made for them. At a gateway providers meeting in my area last Friday, I was told that some people came along to begin with and then stopped turning up. If one has not been in employment for some time, it is often difficult to take the first step. That is another reason why the personal adviser's role is crucial.

In my area, a gateway to the gateway has been introduced. There is a pre-induction course for each group of people who are about to come on to the gateway, to tell them what will be available, so they can start to think about their needs and what they want. I was told, however, that a number of people who were meant to be on one of the first courses were not at home when they were telephoned, which suggests that some of them may have some form of employment elsewhere. We do not know the figures, but we formed that impression.

As the report says, we need to keep a close eye on what is happening with people going through the gateway. We must keep statistics and have strategies for dealing with problems. That is now happening in my area.

A couple of days ago, I chaired a meeting at which the Minister dealt with questions from young environmentalists and those involved in the environmental task force. There are interesting examples of what can be done, and we have perhaps not yet focused sufficiently on them. In my area, forestry work—woodland management—is being done by six or seven trainees at Catton hall, in the South Derbyshire constituency. At the Midland railway centre in my constituency, which is a haven for train buffs, people are not only working on the railways, but doing animal husbandry at the neighbouring, and lovely, Britton Pit farm.

Many other jobs in management and IT, for example, have an environmental element, and the potential for job creation in that area is huge. The programmes must also be monitored to ensure that they are environmentally sensitive and that they can be used, with the millennium environmental volunteers, to promote environmental awareness. The Committee will probably return to that issue in future, but I raise it now because it was discussed at a meeting we attended recently.

The value of the five-year programme is that we can review it, and discover which areas are working well and which areas need tweaking or changing. I have found that Ministers have been responsive to our comments, and communication across the spectrum of those involved has been good. Many Back Benchers have become very involved in the work in their areas, and found it very rewarding.

Last night, I was talking to my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Mr. Shaw), and he told me of a 24-year-old father of two in his constituency who has been unemployed for six out of the past eight years and who told my hon. Friend that he had reached rock bottom. He is now working, through the new deal, for a local construction firm, and he told my hon. Friend: "Now I have my bills sorted out. I am looking forward to buying presents for my kids. Why wasn't new deal brought in years ago?"

8.30 pm

Mr. John Healey (Wentworth): I welcome this debate. The new deal programme is important to every Member of Parliament, because every constituency contains groups of the long-term unemployed who will benefit from it. I am therefore disappointed that not one Back Bencher from either of the main Opposition parties is present in the Chamber.

In areas such as Rotherham and South Yorkshire—and the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott)—the new deal is the single most important policy programme of this Labour Government. For those whom the new deal aims to help, it is the first serious investment that they have seen from any Government in giving them real hope and opportunities to work and train, instead of drawing the dole.

Rotherham was proud to be picked as a pathfinder area for the new deal. We were proud to place in work the first new deal recruit in the country on 5 January. That recruit was Simon Turner, a 23-year-old who had never worked since leaving education. R. G. Components took him on as an engineering trainee, and, after he settled in, Steve Corbridge, the personnel manager, said that he was a smashing lad who loved working and was eager to do whatever was asked of him.

The twist in the tail is that, in September, R. G. Components was hit by a serious factory fire and had to lay off several workers, including Simon. However, by the start of October, Simon was in work again, through the open labour market, and he is still there. That is one case, like the many cited by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Judy Mallaber), that is testimony to the new deal achieving the twin aims of employability and employment.

I cannot understand the Conservatives, who begrudge the investment in the unemployed and belittle the achievements in opening up new opportunities for unemployed people. The Conservatives have opposed the new deal from the start. We should never forget that, without a Labour Government, we would never have had a new deal for lone parents, for disabled people or for older unemployed people. Without a Labour Government, Simon Turner would not be in work today, and 441 other youngsters in the Rotherham area would not hold the jobs that they now have.

In paragraph 1 of the Committee's report on pathfinder areas, we state:

"It is too early to say with certainty that the New Deal works but we find the early evidence of success very encouraging."

The early signs of success include 185,000 young people taking up the new deal, of whom 38,500 are now in jobs. Youth unemployment is at its lowest level for 30 years. An interesting pattern is emerging, because the new deal is doing well, and not just in those areas whose local economies are doing well.

The unemployment unit, Youthaid, probably the most authoritative source of analysis and comment on the new deal, will release next week an analysis of the performance of the delivery units across the country. To do that, it will draw on data already published by the Department. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Minister for making available on an unprecedented scale detailed information and figures to do with the operation of the new deal so that we can analyse its performance.

The unemployment unit will produce what it calls job entry rates, area by area, showing the proportion of young people who have begun the new deal, and who are in work. In some areas of high unemployment, a large proportion of young people are going into jobs. Other areas in which local jobs growth and the economy are strong are performing poorly. We can draw the conclusion that, although the state of the local economy is important to the success of the new deal, the most critical factors are perhaps the commitment of the Employment Service and the new deal partner organisations, and the drive of key figures in those organisations.

That has certainly been my experience in Rotherham, and I pay tribute to Peter Little, who leads the Employment Service; Chris Mallender, assistant chief executive of the local council; Chris Duff and Paul Iseard, who head new deal work at the chamber of commerce training and enterprise council; Roy Barnes, who does the lifetime careers input; and, Pat Heron, who, crucially, leads the local employers' coalition on the new deal.

The commitment of employers in the Rotherham area has been fundamental to the programme's success. That experience was reflected in the Select Committee, where Members were impressed with the evidence of Employment Service district managers. That is why the Committee recommended, in recommendation 20, that the Department's review of contracting procedures should invite first-hand information from district managers and new deal partner organisations. I am disappointed that the Department is missing that opportunity to gather valuable insights from the front line, and to emphasise that the new deal is inclusive, flexible and adaptable in the light of experience of what does and does not work.

The Select Committee paid attention to three other areas on which recommendations have been made to the Department. Paragraphs 39 to 43 of the report relate to new deal jobs in the public sector. Local authorities lobbied hard to be included in the jobs option of the new deal. Ministers listened, and, last September, adapted the programme to allow the wage subsidy arrangements of the new deal for public sector jobs. However, having risen to the challenge in leading local partnerships and in contracting for gateway provision, voluntary sector places and the environmental task force, the local authorities have failed so far to rise to the challenge of generating real jobs within the option for which they so strongly argued.

There are exceptions. Seventy jobs as classroom assistants have been created in Wales under the new deal, and 240 jobs have been created in the national health service in Scotland. Those are new jobs created under the new deal. To some extent, that shows the way ahead for the public sector part of the programme. We should expect local government and the NHS to raise their games. The Government should more forcefully encourage them to do so.

During its inquiry, the Select Committee went to one of the country's leading pathfinder areas, in Cornwall.

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): Hear, hear.

Mr. Healey: I have to say that it is one of the leading areas, not least as a tribute to all the work done to develop the new deal by my hon. Friend the Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton).

I sat in on a discussion with local employers—small employers, in the main—signed up to the new deal. They said that the local economy was all right and that they were doing relatively well. They were looking to expand, but, being small, they could perhaps offer only a new part-time post. However, with the new deal, the job subsidy and the training dowry that comes with the new deal recruit, they could turn that part-time post into a full-time one.

We heard the same evidence from the district manager of the Eastbourne office of the Employment Service. She made it clear that in Eastbourne the wage subsidy was in large part used as a subsidy for small firms, and was essential in their expansion. I am therefore concerned that, by focusing simply on employment, and not on the potential for employment growth as well, we are to some extent missing the opportunity to get more for the money that we are investing in the new deal.

The Department's response to some of the points in our report is rather vague. In response to recommendations 11 and 12 in particular, it talks rather vaguely about what it terms a "sample survey of employers" in relation to new deal job creation, rather than building the issue into the Employment Service's negotiations of new deal contracts, employer by employer. I hope that the Minister can at least give us some more details about the planned evaluation of the extent to which the new deal is contributing to economic growth and local economic expansion.

The Committee's report deals at some length with the gateway and with the personal advisers who are the essential foundations of the gateway. Personal advisers are not just the starting point for the new deal; in my view, they are the pivot on which the success or failure of the new deal programme for the client turns.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), the Chairman of the Committee, described personal advisers as agents of transformation within the Employment Service. I agree. To my mind, personal advisers are the single most important innovation in the new deal for young people and in the new deal for lone parents. I pay tribute to the work that they do and to the way in which they have transformed the experience of the programme for the young people and lone parents involved. Personal advisers have to be the basis on which we develop the future of our employment and benefit services, and certainly the future of our proposed single work-focused gateway.

Although the report endorsed the role of personal advisers, it also reflected criticism from providers that they were not referring new deal clients fast enough,

[Mr. Healey]

either to providers of gateway services or to providers of options. Instead of experiencing the gateway as an intensive spell of assessment, tasters and guidance, many young people found that they were on a regime of weekly or fortnightly interviews with their new deal personal advisers.

Having examined the problem in some detail in Rotherham, I have found that it is not caused simply by the personal adviser wanting to build a solid relationship with the new deal client before referring him to a possible provider. Many young people in Rotherham area have been to the providers before. They have done the interpersonal skills, time-keeping and job-search skills courses. Even within the new deal programme, they regard referrals to some of the same places and agencies as merely another part of the scheme.

Rotherham has been selected as a pilot area for the 25-plus new deal. We are linking the completion of basic skills modules with what we are calling a "skills for Rotherham passport". Under the scheme, employers in Rotherham, organised by the new deal employers coalition, guarantee a job interview and work trial to any unemployed person who has this passport. In that way, unemployed people are beginning to see a clear link between the employability skills training that they are required to undertake and workplace outcomes and potential results.

In Rotherham, we need to reflect that experience and replicate it in the main new deal for 18 to 24-year-olds. We need also to make the linkage between the gateway and the new deal options a good deal more flexible. For instance, in the gateway period there may be training for a particular job that a young person could be lined up to take. There may, for instance, be more workplace tasters and fewer jobcentre or classroom sessions. There may also be the opportunity for basic skills courses, partly delivered in gateway, as part of the option that the young person moves on to, thereby enabling him or her to move on to that option more quickly.

In summary, the pathfinders for the main new deal and the pilots for the loan parents new deal show the way forward, including the adjustments that we still need to make to both programmes to obtain the most from the new deal. The experience of both to date shows strong signs of the success and importance of the new deal.

8.45 pm

Ms Candy Atherton (Falmouth and Camborne): I am grateful to be able to take part in the debate. It has been a fascinating experience as a Member in a pathfinder area to monitor the new deal for 18 to 24-year-olds, and an area where the new deal for the over-25s is being piloted.

I am a member of the Select Committee, and we have seen other members of it in fine performance this evening. I have found the investigations that we have been conducting as we monitor the new deal some of the most interesting aspects of my work as a Member of this place. I sometimes wish that we had a new deal to enable us to spend more time monitoring this work. It seems that this interest resides on the Government Benches, given the vast ranks of empty Opposition Benches.

Mr. Keetch: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Atherton: Oh, dear.

Mr. Keetch: I always enjoy intervening on the hon. Lady. Does she think that more interest might be shown on the Opposition Benches—the Government Benches are not exactly crowded—if we had more than one debate on unemployment per year? Our most recent debate on unemployment took place almost exactly a year ago. Perhaps we should have some more debates on unemployment. The Liberal Democrats, if the Government would care to give us some more Opposition days, would love to have a debate on unemployment on one of those days.

Ms Atherton: The hon. Gentleman's memory is a little short. I remember debating employment less than three weeks ago, when the hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) was present. If the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) had been present, he might have contributed to the debate on the Gracious Speech as well as being involved in this debate.

It is amazing to see the results of the new deal. Some hon. Members may remember my holding forth last winter on a young black man in Cornwall who wanted to work in home insulation, but whose dreadlocks, unfortunately, were seen by a local employer as a disadvantage. The local company was looking for a new deal recruit and the young man was desperate to work in home insulation. Sadly, the company told the jobcentre, "No way."

The young man's personal adviser talked to the company and with the young man. His adviser persuaded him to compromise by putting on a hat, and persuaded the company to give him a try. Two weeks ago, I met that young man again as I helped promote home insulation for older people in the Falmouth area. He is now employed full time with the company—well past six months—and he has been joined by another new dealer.

Mr. Healey: Is he wearing his hat?

Ms Atherton: Wait. Both he and the company are as happy as Larry. He no longer wears a hat and, interestingly, he has cut his hair slightly. He still sports the dreadlocks, but everyone is happy.

Some of the life stories and life-changing events of the past eleven and a half months are breathtaking. One example is the young man who had been a heroin addict in Cornwall for four years. He failed to tell his bewildered family, and finally admitted all to his personal adviser. He then felt able to tell his father, accepted help from the community drugs team, is now off heroin and is about to start the full-time education option.

How, I ask Opposition Members, does one put a price on that? How does one compute the costs of that young man's benefits, the tax that he was not paying, the possibility of his family following in his footsteps, the probability of a life leading into crime, and the effects on the rest of the community? I could go on. Those are the social costs that never appear on a spreadsheet, but mean the earth to those whom they affect.

I find as I visit local companies that many of the young people taken on through the new deal have been promoted and offered full-time permanent jobs at the end of six months. That will be the key to the long-term success of the new deal. Charities and voluntary organisations are taking on the young people when they finish their six months. It is now rare for me not to find a new dealer on my visits to local companies or organisations.

There is no doubt about it—the Cornish know a good deal when they see one. That is why the grapevine has spread the news. Young people on the new deal are to be found in all parts of the county. In an area where jobs are precious, more than 1,200 job opportunities have been notified by employers across the county. More than 600 employers have signed up.

The figures are illuminating: 385 people have been placed in unsubsidised work, not including the young people who found their own jobs during the gateway; 445 are on the employment option; 332 are in full-time education; and about 400 are split evenly between the voluntary sector option and the environmental task force. If one puts all those bewildering figures together, one finds that more than 1,500 young people have been offered opportunities that they would not otherwise have had.

In an area where almost 90 per cent. of our companies employ fewer than 10 people, it is clear that many small businesses each see the new deal as the way forward to create jobs and develop their businesses. Indeed, as was mentioned earlier, in our report we note the capacity-building opportunities that the new deal presents to small companies. I have anecdotal evidence of that from employers across Cornwall, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) from his area. I pay tribute to his work in Rotherham, as he paid tribute to mine in Cornwall.

Employers in Cornwall are saying that they have made the jump from employing a part-time worker to employing a full-time worker because of the opportunities that the new deal creates. The Government could pay more attention to that aspect of the new deal. Particularly in areas such as mine, it has been a major incentive for employers to improve their competitiveness locally and expand their companies.

One of the issues that Opposition Members raised frequently during the debate on the Queen's Speech was the costs of the new deal and the alleged lack of benefits to employers. I challenged hon. Members to visit Cornwall and hear for themselves what local employers are saying. What was said from the Opposition Benches bore no relation to what employers in the county—let alone young people—are saying to me. Surprise, surprise—Opposition Members have not taken up the challenge to visit an area which they know is a Tory-free zone. They dare not. The new deal is one of the great success stories of the Government, and there have been many in the county of Cornwall.

I find it wonderful to watch a previously ground-down service—the Employment Service—thrive and bloom with the new deal. I do not want civil servants to feel that they cannot be proud of working for Government. There is no doubt that, where the Employment Service locally has offered inspired leadership and driven the programme forward, it has succeeded.

There are lessons to be learned, and the reports that we are debating today—as well as future reports—will focus on that. I pay tribute to Michelle Maslen, the leader of the Employment Service in Cornwall, for the work that she and her team have done to drive forward the new deal in the county. Let us be clear about this: the offices look different, and attitudes are different. An energetic and committed Minister—my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities—has been vital in driving the programme forward, and, oh, what a difference there is between the Employment Service now and under the Tories.

Our report on the pathfinders placed heavy emphasis on the importance of personal advisers. Members of the Select Committee share concern that they may become overloaded and that quality might be sacrificed for quantity. The personal advisers have been one of the great successes of the new deal. Let us not waste this opportunity to invigorate civil servants and put pride back into the service.

Time is moving on, so I shall not say much of what I wanted to say. My hon. Friends—*[Interruption.]* My hon. Friends are telling me that I am all right to continue; I have time.

We are currently piloting the new deal for people aged 25 and over, and I am pleased that early entry is offered to people over 50 who have been unemployed for more than three months. Crucially for an area that had five of the top 20 unemployment travel-to-work areas this January, there will be entry from day one of unemployment for seasonal workers. I am talking not only about tourism, but about our struggling horticulture industry, which is facing severe difficulties. Day-one entry is very important. Classic low pay alongside seasonal employment has always been a double whammy for many in the county. Roll on April, and the national minimum wage.

Work has also started on tackling the other end of the problems that we face—those who slip through the education net at 15 and 16. As 30 per cent. of 15, 16 and 17-year-olds in Camborne are lone parents, many of my colleagues and I are desperate to raise many of those young women's aspirations. Should the area achieve education action zone status next year, as I hope it will be able to do, more work can be done to tackle the situation.

It cannot be right for a third of young girls in Camborne to see lone parenthood as the be-all and end-all of their aspirations. Colleagues on the Education and Employment Committee will smile, but the judicious use of objective 1 funds will be important in raising aspirations. I am delighted that the new deal is reaching many of the brothers and sisters of those girls and enabling them to hold their heads up and see a future.

Mr. Derek Foster: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Ms Atherton: Yes, if my right hon. Friend is brief.

Mr. Foster: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the way in which she has campaigned to achieve objective 1 status. We failed to achieve it in the county of Durham, but I am delighted that she has succeeded, as are many people in my county.

Ms Atherton: I thank my right hon. Friend. We await the final signature on the dotted line, but we hope to achieve objective 1 status for the county of Cornwall.

I want to tell hon. Members about a new dealer aged 24 who had no qualifications, only six months' work experience and literacy and numeracy problems. He completely lacked confidence, but his personal adviser guided him towards the environmental task force. He gained work experience, a reference, a fork-lift truck certificate and units towards a general national vocational qualification. He found permanent employment within a

[Ms Atherton]

month of completing the option. How do we put a price on that? We should compute the benefits that he and a future family might have required for generations, and think of the social benefits of that young man presenting a role model to his family and tackling his educational problems.

Last month, Opposition Members claimed that the new deal was failing, but clearly for many thousands of young people it has offered opportunities that were previously undreamed of. More than 38,500 young people who previously had no job now have one. We all know that anyone can play around with figures—the Tories did it frequently with the unemployment figures—but seeing young people happy and settled in long-term jobs, and in many cases careers, has been a real achievement for the Government. If one does not deduct payments made by employed people, one ends up with a totally spurious figure, as the Tories did last month. Given that so many of their former colleagues now qualify for the new deal, one would have thought that they would be willing it to succeed.

This week, I opened a training centre in Camborne. It operates from a former derelict site in the town centre, so we benefit from a refurbished town centre site and a new training centre. Behind the quiet, restrained exterior was a positive blooming of skills: young men training for building and other skills in a quiet and studious atmosphere. As the Eden project is being built in Cornwall—probably the biggest greenhouse in the world—we shall need many brickies, not to mention glaziers. New-dealers are working for the project, so it all goes round in circles.

May I sound a cautionary note? Some further education colleges do not believe that the training funding is sufficient. Other providers, however, have told me that it is more than sufficient, which just goes to show that one cannot please all the people all the time.

Ms Abbott: The point that my hon. Friend has made about training colleges is important. The Government must look again at the level of funding in areas with problems of literacy and basic skills.

Ms Atherton: I am quite prepared to accept that. I was implying that training providers outside further education colleges, which, let us face it, also receive funding, said that they were not getting enough money, yet training organisations said that their funding was sufficient. Perhaps we do need to look again at funding; I accept what my hon. Friend says about numeracy and literacy.

We must also ensure that bureaucracy does not deter business, particularly small businesses. Red tape could be the devil of the scheme. Although I am aware that the Committee demands ever more statistics from the Department, those statistics must be sensitively collected.

Another interesting fact that the new deal has brought to light is that colleges and training providers are finding that a new group is becoming involved in the new deal—young people from areas that are so rural that they have little or no access to public or any other form of transport. As a result, in the past they have opted out of the educational and training system. The new deal has flushed them out. Some inspired leadership has had to be shown in devising a means of getting such people to work by training providers, the transport broker appointed by Cornwall county, and by the Employment Service.

One interesting new dealer travels to work on his skateboard. He was just about to leave Cornwall and head off to another part of the country to get away from what he called "the economic blackspot known as Cornwall" when he entered the new deal in January. He had no transport other than his skateboard, which he used to look for vacancies. He was prepared to take on any job that was offered to him. A local company was looking for a new production trainee. It gave him the job, and he offered to take on all extra duties and to work through holidays when other members of staff were away. So impressed was the employer that he was taken on full time at the end of the six months. He still travels to work on his skateboard.

May I sound another note of caution? In its travels the Committee found that other schemes, such as Working Nation in Australia, have tended to restrict opportunities and flexibility due to the inevitable adverse comment that journalists just love to make. I urge my hon. Friend the Minister to take courage and retain flexibility so that personal advisers can respond in the most appropriate manner to a person's needs. Do not make people fit the programme; let the programme be flexible enough to fit the individual.

The Minister must consider with great care the area of the new deal that we have not announced. I am concerned about the group of people—mostly older men—for whom no programme is in place. That is a great oversight. I urge the Minister to consider introducing a new deal for hereditary peers as a matter of great urgency. It is all they deserve.

9.5 pm

Yvette Cooper (Pontefract and Castleford): I, too, welcome the debate on the new deal. It is an extremely important area of Government policy. Rather than repeat many of the points ably made by my colleagues on the Committee, I shall concentrate my remarks on the second of the two reports we are considering, which is on the new deal for lone parents.

We should not underestimate how revolutionary the new deal for lone parents is, because it helps a group of ople who have been ignored by the Employment Service and by the state for a very long time. They have been abandoned as the passive recipients of benefits. The underlying assumption that mothers are at home looking after children, that if they want to work they can manage that themselves without any assistance, and that they probably stay at home anyway, is out of date. Some women will choose to stay at home and look after their children, particularly young children. The Committee has made it clear in its report that individuals should be left to make that choice. The Committee felt that it was not a matter on which we should make recommendations.

Those choices are more available to some than to others. It is a striking fact that 62 per cent. of mothers are in work, whereas only 42 per cent. of single mothers are in work. Single mothers do not have the same range of choices as mothers with a partner who helps them bring up the children. I make no apology for concentrating my remarks on single mothers. It is true that many of the points we have made in our report are equally applicable

to lone fathers who are at home bringing up children. However, as the majority of lone parents are single mothers, and as women in the labour market face particular additional problems, I have chosen to concentrate my remarks primarily on them.

It is easy to understand why single mothers face more obstacles getting into work. If there is someone else at home, there is someone else to juggle the child care responsibilities, so that child care or the lack of it is less of an obstacle. There are also two wage packets to share the cost of child care, which increases the chances of going out to work. If mothers are on their own, the sheer work load of looking after the children makes it harder for them to keep their skills up to date and to keep in touch with the world of work.

For the first time, the Government are facing up to those problems. The Employment Service contacts lone parents saying, "We're interested in you. We care about you." Lone parent new deal advisers provide women with information about jobs, child care and, most important of all, the benefits system and the impact of in-work benefits, which are incomprehensible to most people, even if they have begun to work out the details of the system.

Mr. Healey: One of the experiences from the pilots of the new deal for lone parents is that new deal advisers build up a special relationship with customers, and that has not happened before. On Monday, a new deal adviser for lone parents told me that her colleagues do not know whether it is a personal call or a customer on the line, because they all ask for Lorraine.

Yvette Cooper: We should not underestimate the support that personal advisers can give. I have a letter that was sent to the new deal lone parent adviser in my local employment service by a woman who has now got a job through the new deal for lone parents in my area. She wrote:

"I am overwhelmed with tears as I cannot believe that all of you should take so much time and effort in helping me in the way you have done. Without your compassion, expertise and backup I know I would have given up and been back at stage one on income support."

Personal relationships such as that give people the confidence that enables them to go out and try things that they would not have tried before—to take the step into work that they might not otherwise have had the strength to take.

Judy Mallaber: We have found evidence of that positive relationship with new deal advisers everywhere. I feel that I have let the side down by not mentioning advisers in my area. The two people I mentioned earlier were looked after at the job centre by Tina and Paula. Does my hon. Friend agree that that relationship has been a universal theme?

Yvette Cooper: Yes—and those of us who have been concerned about the Employment Service and its history should especially congratulate those who have turned around its functions to such an extent, enabling it to play a very different role from the role that it used to play. While we are engaging in this congratulations love-in, let me pay tribute to Dave Barrett, the Employment Service manager in Castleford, and to his team, who have done so much locally.

Mr. Derek Foster: I am supposed to be the expert here—the one who is long in the tooth, having been in the House for nearly 20 years—but I have not even mentioned my constituency, let alone any personal advisers.

Yvette Cooper: The new deal for lone parents is only just getting going in my area. So far it has held 58 interviews; many of those interviewed did not receive a letter, but volunteered to go in. Thirteen people have been helped into work. One person wrote to an adviser:

"Thank you for all your help in getting me back to work. I am really enjoying the job and all the money."

That is great stuff. It epitomises what the new deal is all about. Part of the role of the Employment Service, and the Benefits Agency, is to enable people to do things, rather than merely handing things out.

I have some anxieties about the new deal for lone parents, however: I do not think that it is fulfilling its potential. Although its approach is revolutionary, and although it is doing much that has not been done before, I feel that it could do more. As the Committee's report states, we believe that the new deal for lone parents should include an education and training option like that provided by the young unemployed new deal. Education and training are important to lone parents, and the new deal should focus on them more.

If we look at the figures, 79 per cent. of mothers with degrees are in work, and 79 per cent of single mothers with degrees are in work. A single mother with a degree is just as likely to be in work as a mother with a partner. At the other end of the qualifications scale, it is a different story: 40 per cent. of mothers with no qualifications are in work, while only 21 per cent. of single mothers with no qualifications are in work. In other words, those with no qualifications are twice as likely to be working if they have partners.

Skills make a massive difference to lone parents' chances of being employed. Let us look at the position in a slightly different way: a lone parent with a degree has a 79 per cent. chance of being in work, while a lone parent with no qualifications has a 21 per cent. chance. All the evidence that we took on the Select Committee reinforced that point. All the anecdotal evidence, and all the evidence from the groups, experts and lone parents themselves was that low skills and low qualifications were a huge barrier to getting into work.

Obviously, child care, benefit advice and all those things are important, but, fundamentally, skills are the key thing that make a massive difference. That should not surprise us.

Ms Abbott: My hon. Friend has made an important point. Does she share my concern about a constituent of mine who went to the new deal for lone parents office for help with child care because she was going to study, and was refused that help on the basis that her course was too advanced? She was going to do an access course for teaching. Teachers are badly needed in Hackney. The new deal needs to maximise the level of skill that people are encouraged to acquire.

Yvette Cooper: Hear, hear. My hon. Friend makes a good point. The link between child care and education, particularly child care and further education, has to be developed further if we are to help many single parents and, also, many parents generally into work who currently are unable to work.

[Yvette Cooper]

None of that surprises us. Ministers spend the whole time talking about the importance of education, training and skills, and the barrier that low skills pose for people who want to get work and find that they cannot. That is, after all, what the new deal for young people is all about. That focus on raising employability is the key to the new deal for the young unemployed. It is why, in the long term, the new deal for the young unemployed will successfully keep people in work five years down the line, not just help them into their first job tomorrow.

The emphasis in the new deal for lone parents seems to be slightly different. Rather than focusing on employability, it seems to focus more on employment. The Select Committee recommended that the education and training option should be flagged up in bold, as it were, to focus women on reskilling—not just on getting their first job—and to help them to get a long-term career.

I found the Government's reply to the report's comments on that issue slightly disappointing. It points out that support is readily available for women on income support to go into further education. That is right. The Committee has never recommended that there should be a new funding stream, for example, or that we should change the structure in relation to lone parents' entitlement to join education and training courses if they are on income support. However, the key issue is to flag it up to people to make them aware that that is something that they can do. In my experience, many lone mothers are not aware that they are entitled to have their fees paid for various further education courses and other such courses.

The Department mentions in its reply that it has amended the letter that goes out to lone parents to flag up the education and training possibilities. I have a copy of that letter. It says:

"If you've been wondering whether work is right for you then you've probably thought about all the difficulties. No doubt you've got many questions. Our team is here to provide answers.

As Personal Advisers for lone parents, we've been specially trained to help you through the process of getting a job. We can advise on which jobs may be right for you and we can calculate how much better off you may be in work. We can help you with applications and, if you want, suggest training courses."

That is it. That is only the reference to training courses.

The letter goes on to refer to benefits and to help in finding child care. There are several more paragraphs saying, for example, that if lone parents decide that the job is not right for them, they do not have to proceed. It is a good letter, but, in the five paragraphs, there is only one brief reference to training courses. The letter does not mention that lone parents will not have to pay for those courses, are already entitled to them, or that they might be an extremely good thing to think of doing.

Many single mothers who are out of work have low skills and may have left education earlier than they needed to, or may be anxious about going back into education—or it may not have occurred to them—but the letter does not give them the idea of perhaps going on a training course. If it did, it might raise the take-up rate. It might raise the number of lone parents who go along to the Employment Service and respond to the letter. Many people will not feel ready yet to go into work. Perhaps their children are still quite young, or they do not know whether child care arrangements will work out. Perhaps it has been a long time since they have been in the labour market and they do not feel very confident because their skills are out of date. Perhaps they will not want to start something and then have to let people down. However, if there were a transition mechanism—such as a course, for example, which could help people to build their confidence, update their skills, give them time to work out child care arrangements and to discover whether the kids can cope getting home on their own—some people would be able to get into work who would not be able to without it.

I wondered whether the Department's letter was expressing a fundamental difference in approach between the new deal for lone parents and the new deal for the young unemployed. It is possible that the Department is taking a different view—it is perfectly valid, although I disagree with it—of the new deal for lone parents. If such a view is being taken, I should like to hear more about it from the Minister, as we should have a public debate on it. The view is essentially that work comes first: we get people into work first, and training, education and lifelong learning will follow. Such a view maintains that we must make families better off, and that the quickest way of doing that is to get parents into work, rather than diverting them from jobs into education and training.

There is evidence from other countries.

Mr. Keetch: Sadly, the hon. Lady was unable to join the rest of the Committee members in Australia. However, the point that she is making was made very strongly in the countless meetings and discussions that we had there on the precursor of the new deal and on the current scheme. People who have had the mere opportunity of training and of turning up at an interview looking smart and presentable were able not only to get a job but to find better jobs, and so to progress. She is making a very valid point.

Yvette Cooper: It is true that the best thing for many people will be to go into work first, and subsequently to consider lifelong learning and further education and training. However, for lone parents, the reverse is more likely to be true. As they have child care responsibilities, are more likely to be anxious about those responsibilities and are more likely to have already spent several years out of the labour market, the reverse approach—to ease them into work through education and training—would be more beneficial for them than for other groups who are currently outside the labour market. However, there is no conclusive evidence on that. Nevertheless, it seems that the work-first option—unlike the education-and-training-first option—is being heavily pushed in the new deal for lone parents, and that is a mistake.

We should be pushing the education and training option for lone parents. I ask the Minister to consider rewriting the letter and to flag up a big education and training option for lone parents. After all, we are pushing that option for those who are participating in the new deal for the young unemployed. For them, we are thinking about their long-term employability and what they will be doing not only tomorrow but five or 10 years down the line.

If we decide that the lone parents' new deal should concentrate on employment, whereas the young person's new deal should concentrate on employability, I fear that we will be in danger of fuelling some dangerous

prejudices. Although I do not think that the Department is inspired by such prejudices, there is a danger that we might fuel them. The first prejudice is that men have careers, but women have jobs. I think that, across society, that is still the prevalent view. An aspect of that view is that women, especially those with children, are fine in relatively low-paid and low-skilled jobs because their jobs take second place to their family responsibilities, whereas men think about long-term careers. After all, the young person's new deal is dealing primarily with men.

Secondly, I fear that concentrating on employment for lone parents but employability for the young unemployed will fuel the prejudice that the problem of low skills affects primarily men. That is increasingly evident in the media. It is said that women do not have a skills problem because girls do better than boys at school. Women have child care problems. Men have a skills problem because the old unskilled manual jobs have gone, so they need to be reskilled or they are not going to get jobs. The assumption is that lone parents need only child care to help them get through. Those views are mistaken. I hope that the Government will adapt the new deal for lone parents to take into account the importance of education and training.

I congratulate the Government on their revolutionary approach to the new deal for lone parents, which is incredibly important. They are doing more than any Government before. It is not clear that any Government before has done anything to help that group into work. The new deal for young people is brilliant. I hope that the Minister will be able to ensure that the new deal for lone parents can be brilliant, too.

9.26 pm

Mr. David Willetts (Havant): This has been an interesting debate, following some valuable reports from the Select Committee. I thank the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), the Chairman of the Committee, for the way in which he introduced the report and explained why the Conservative Member of the Committee was not able to be present tonight.

Sometimes the debate became a little like an Oscar ceremony, with speakers naming all the individuals who have made the achievement possible. When it was not an Oscar ceremony, it was like a revivalist meeting, in which individual personal triumphs were celebrated, with the education Whip leading the hallelujahs from the Front Bench.

We have to look rationally and coolly at the spending of £5 billion of public money. The right hon. Gentleman introduced the debate in a spirit of appraising how effective the programme was and what information we had to judge it on. Some Labour Members were so preoccupied with celebrating individual successes that they did not seem to accept that young people were finding jobs before the new deal came along. There were even young people who had been unemployed for more than six months who found jobs before the new deal came along.

Judy Mallaber: Does the hon. Gentleman recall that, when we talked about those who had disappeared and we did not know what had happened to them, I pointed out that, in my area, a number of them had got jobs? We are well aware of that. We are seeking jobs for those who are unable to get them.

Mr. Willetts: It would be wrong to count every person who leaves the gateway and goes into employment as a success for the new deal. As evidence submitted to the Select Committee shows, 80 per cent. of young people who had been unemployed for six months moved off benefit in the following year anyway. I guess that that is one reason for recommendation 5 in the eighth report. It is a good recommendation. It begins:

"We question whether the numbers recorded as entering unsubsidised employment should all be registered as outcomes from the Gateway."

That is an important point. We cannot assess the success of the programme without reflecting on what would have happened without it.

We think that the programme is an expensive way in which to deal with youth unemployment, because, once it is recognised that a significant proportion of those involved would have got off benefit anyway, we are left with a large sum of money being spent on small numbers of extra young people—if any—moving into work. The figures change almost every week, but we are talking about roughly 21,000 people moving into unsubsidised jobs and 9,000 moving into subsidised ones.

If we took the approach hinted at in recommendation 5 in the Select Committee report and did not count the people moving into unsubsidised jobs from the gateway as successes of the new deal, but only the 9,000 moving into subsidised jobs, we would have an even higher cost per job for the new deal than the £11,000 calculated by my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) in the pamphlet published by the Centre for Policy Studies. We need to consider exactly what the new deal delivers in terms of employment opportunities in addition to what would have happened anyway.

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Mr. Andrew Smith): Does the hon. Gentleman concur with the figure that was published by the Centre for Policy Studies and the means by which it was calculated?

Mr. Willetts: I am the deputy chairman of the Centre for Policy Studies and I was very proud of that publication. If anything, it is an underestimate. The costing of £11,000 is reached on the basis of those entering subsidised and unsubsidised jobs. If my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford had followed recommendation 5 and counted only the subsidised jobs, he would have calculated an even higher cost per job under the new deal. He went out of his way to be generous to the Minister. It is a pity that he did not read the report in the spirit in which it was written.

Mr. Derek Foster: The hon. Gentleman heard me say that the economy can be run more successfully with more employable people and more adaptable organisations. I admit that that is incalculable, but the hon. Gentleman ignores that factor completely in his rather narrow concept of costing.

Mr. Willetts: I appreciate that that is one argument for the new deal. Over time we have been offered various

[Mr. Willetts]

arguments. We were told that it would save money that could then be released into education, but the profile of expenditure in the new deal does not appear to anticipate any savings during the lifetime of this Parliament. It certainly does not appear to be tailing off. Rather than spend the remaining few minutes on that, perhaps I can refer the right hon. Gentleman to a separate pamphlet on welfare to work in which I tackle precisely that point, which Professor Layard, now one of the Minister's advisers, is very keen on.

I now turn to priorities. If Ministers believe that the new deal is so effective, why is money distributed in the way that it is? There are nearly twice as many long-term unemployed as there are young people unemployed for more than six months, yet young people get five times the budget. Ten times more per person is being spent on the young unemployed than on the long-term unemployed. As the hon. Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) said, even less per person is being spent on single parents. Recommendation 8 in the seventh report was that

"the New Deal for Lone Parents"

should

"offer a full-time education and training option".

If Ministers believe in the effectiveness of the new deal, it hardly seems equitable to distribute the resources between young unemployed, long-term unemployed and single parents in the way in which they are allocated in the new deal programme over the next four years.

Statistics suggest that the long-term unemployed have a lower chance of getting back into work. Young people, even if they have been unemployed for six months, are particularly mobile and have a relatively good record of moving off benefit. The problem is older people who have lost contact with the labour market for longer.

Let me raise some specific points. We are told that personal advisers are an important part of the new deal. I have enjoyed visiting several new deal projects in different parts of the country, and if the hon. Member for Falmouth and Cranborne—

Ms Atherton: It is Falmouth and Camborne.

Mr. Willetts: I do not know why that name sprang to mind. In fact, my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford cannot be here this evening because he is attending his association annual dinner at which Lord Cranborne was supposed to have been the guest of honour.

As I was trying to say, the hon. Member for Falmouth and Camborne (Ms Atherton) invites me to Cornwall every time that we debate this issue. At this rate, I shall indeed end up going to Cornwall to inspect the new deal there.

Ms Atherton: I am happy to invite the hon. Gentleman to Cornwall, as long as he meets the young people and the employers whom the Select Committee met—they might change his attitude significantly. If he wants only to visit the Falmouth and Camborne Conservative association, then forget it. If he wants genuinely to learn, however, I should be delighted to escort him personally.

Mr. Willetts: There is a limit to this, but I am sure that something could be arranged.

Mr. Keetch: May I suggest that, if the hon. Gentleman visits Cornwall, he does more than the Select Committee did? Despite the fact that we flew into north Cornwall and spent an hour driving across Cornwall, we visited only one constituency—Falmouth and Camborne.

Mr. Willetts: The purpose of the debate is not to discuss regional tours, so let us move on.

Personal advisers represent a labour-intensive way in which to deliver services. The wider introduction of the gateway, which a recent Government document says is a fundamental feature of the welfare reform agenda, means that many people will operate as personal advisers in the Employment Service. Will the Minister give figures showing how many people in the service are working on the new deal, how many personal advisers he believes need to be recruited to deliver the gateway for existing new deal groups in the years ahead, and how much extra effort and how many extra staff will be needed to deliver the further proposals for an intensive personal service for the many people who are not registered as unemployed but who may, in labour force survey terms, be seeking work?

I mentioned firms that have signed up for the new deal but have not yet taken on any new dealers. It will not do for the Minister, 18 months into office, to laud the success of the new programme but, when put under pressure, to blame what he calls the rotten statistical systems that he inherited from the previous Government. The new deal is a new programme and we were told that it would be properly appraised—the Government should be able to offer the information for which I ask.

The media have identified the problem of paedophiles in the programme, outlining some disturbing cases in which serious sex offenders have been referred to work that involves children. I thank the Minister for his letter of 8 December; it was courteous of him to write to explain the position. He said in the letter:

"The primary responsibility for checking the suitability of applicants lies firmly with employers."

The Government cannot entirely wash their hands of the matter, however. There is a rather disconcerting tendency for new dealers to be offered almost indiscriminately to fill any gap in the labour market. The Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Neath (Mr. Hain), I think, believed that they would all be classroom assistants; we have also been told that they will all be child minders. We must be careful in allocating new dealers to positions with such sensitive responsibilities. I would be grateful if the Minister could say in rather more detail than he was able to do in his letter what steps are being taken to prevent sex offenders from being referred to jobs involving children.

The Select Committee report made helpful and interesting comments on the gateway, but there seems to be a problem of people becoming stuck. I should be grateful if the Minister would tell us how many new dealers, especially in pathfinder areas, are still in the gateway four months after entering it. There seems to be a problem of people being left in the gateway. There are theoretical powers to move them on, but it is not clear how often these are being used.

I hope that the Minister will be able to answer some practical questions. If we are to assess the effectiveness of the new deal, the celebration of individual achievements will not do as the basis for appraising expensive new policy options.

9.40 pm

The Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities (Mr. Andrew Smith): We have had a good and a cheerful debate—and so it should be, because the new deal is a cheerful programme, bringing hope and opportunity to people. I speak as one who has visited Cornwall and seen the excellent work that is being done there on the new deal. In fact, I have visited the constituencies of all my hon. Friends who have spoken in the debate. I join everyone who has paid tribute to the Employment Service, to the new deal personal advisers and to everyone else who is working so hard to make a success of this important and ambitious programme.

I join my hon. Friends in finding it disappointing—although, perhaps, all too revealing—that not a single Conservative Back Bencher has taken part in the debate. I accept that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) apologised on behalf of the Conservative member of the Select Committee. However, it shows a dismissive attitude towards one of the most pressing social challenges confronting this country.

The hon. Member for Havant (Mr. Willetts) made a few amusing remarks and sniped here and there at the new deal. However, we had not a scintilla of a suggestion as to what the Conservatives might do differently, or what they might argue ought to have been done differently. They have a right nerve to talk about the priorities of allocating expenditure on new deal programmes when there would have been no new deal if, by some mischance, the Conservatives had won the general election and they had had their way.

The hon. Member for Havant made an important and serious point about sex offenders. I have written to him, to the Chairman of the Select Committee—my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland—and to the hon. Member for Hereford (Mr. Keetch) spelling out the position. The hon. Member for Havant said that the primary responsibility had to be on employers to have appropriate procedures to ensure protection for children and other vulnerable people.

The Employment Service follows common-sense procedures, and lists are held manually by a senior officer in each jobcentre. Staff are advised and reminded that referrals to vacancies should be made where appropriate. Clearly, there will be cases where it is not appropriate to refer particular people who come into a jobcentre to particular things. I assure the hon. Gentleman that, from a senior level right down through the Employment Service, no one would knowingly refer anyone who was likely to offend to a position where he or she would be working with children or other vulnerable people.

There is no doubt that the present system is not absolutely foolproof, and that is why the Government have an interdepartmental working party to examine precisely these matters. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will be making a statement shortly on the establishment of a criminal records agency to set out new and better procedures which, I hope, will command the support of the whole House.

I wish to refer to the Select Committee recommendations. A great number of tributes were paid, rightly, to the work of personal advisers. The report referred to the importance of following up the work of advisers, monitoring the case load and ensuring that the very best was made of the innovation—so important to the new deal—of the continuity and support that personal advisers give. The Government have acted on that recommendation, and we are monitoring the case load.

Moreover, we have given advice throughout Employment Service offices—involving training and a series of meetings with personal advisers—to focus their role and responsibilities on what is important, and to ensure that people are progressing in terms of enhancing their employability, moving into jobs or moving into other options that are right for them.

I find these debates and the Select Committee interviews and reports enormously helpful. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland rightly, and kindly, said, we are a listening and learning Department. We have been flexible, and we have been responsive to the Select Committee recommendations.

The hon. Member for Havant referred to the publication of information on the destinations towards which people are moving at different stages of the gateway. Recommendation 5 said that that should be disaggregated, and we have done that. The information is there for all to see in table 11 of the Government Statistical Service statistics.

We acted on recommendation 18 on capacity building in the voluntary sector, and on recommendation 22 on ethnic minorities. That recommendation also informed a large range of initiatives that we have taken to promote the involvement of, and extend opportunities for, ethnic minorities. Several of my hon. Friends referred to that important issue—notably my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott)—as did the hon. Member for Hereford.

It is not the case that such issues were not anticipated at the outset as crucial to the new deal. I am on record as saying right at the beginning of the new deal, rather as my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington said, that an acid test of its success or otherwise is whether ethnic minorities get full and fair opportunities through it.

That is precisely why we said right at the outset that there had to be ethnic monitoring—for the first time in any Employment Service programme—so that we could see what progress people were making, and assess which initiatives were working and which areas were not delivering opportunities for ethnic minorities.

Ms Abbott: If an understanding of those issues was built into the programme from the beginning, why was not more about them written specifically into Reed's contract, and why was not more care taken to ensure that Reed worked side by side with organisations that had some knowledge of labour market conditions in Hackney and other inner-city areas?

Mr. Smith: It was made clear to all contractors in the process that they would be judged against the viability of the programmes that they initiated to meet the needs of the area that they were proposing to serve. Clearly, in Hackney, as in some other areas, especial importance will need to be attached to the opportunities that the programmes will extend to ethnic minorities.

The Government attach great importance to that, and we have taken a range of initiatives: there is an ethnic minority advisory group to assist the national advisory task force; after widespread consultation throughout the

[Mr. Smith]

country with ethnic minorities, as well as the general public, we have drawn up an ethnic minority strategy; and we regularly review the membership and work of the partnerships throughout the country, which have such an important role in involving ethnic minorities and ensuring that programmes are sensitive to their needs.

I do not go to a meeting with partnerships or local providers—today, I attended meetings in Manchester, Bolton and Stockton to see at first hand how the new deal is working—without raising the question of the work that is done to ensure fair opportunities for ethnic minorities.

We have to be constantly vigilant. The levels of youth and long-term unemployment among ethnic minorities in this country are a scandal. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington said, they are as much as two or three times higher than the average. That shows the failure in the past to provide the necessary training and opportunities, and to challenge the stereotypes and discrimination that so often stand in the way of progress.

There can be no room for complacency, and the Government are certainly not complacent. We can start to judge progress by the statistics that we have published; they show that ethnic minorities are moving into unsubsidised jobs from the new deal at very nearly the same rate as the total population. Ethnic minorities are disproportionately over-represented on the full-time education and training and the voluntary sector options of the new deal, but they are under-represented on the employment and environmental task force options.

We are analysing that to see how far the under-representation on the employment option results from a lower rate of referral to employer option vacancies and how far it results from a lower rate of acceptance into those vacancies by employers. We will be able to compare how different areas are doing, see what is working best and take corrective action where necessary.

Mr. Keetch *rose—*

Mr. Smith: I am sorry, but time is limited and I wish to cover many points that arose during the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, North and Stoke Newington referred to Reed and its contract. I assure her that that contract was let with absolute propriety, as were all the other new deal contracts, and with the same procedures being followed in every case. The criteria were applied fairly and properly, and the decisions were made by officials.

I hope that my hon. Friend will accept that assurance and, equally, my assurance that performance will be scrutinised closely, whether a partnership is led by the private sector or by the employment sector or is a joint venture. They will all be judged by the same standards, and corrective action will be taken to tackle under-performance. That approach is at the heart of the continual improvement strategy for the new deal. We have consulted the partnerships about that strategy, and it is important in turning, already good programme into an even better one for the future.

It is an enormous accomplishment to have helped 38,500 young people off benefit and into jobs, and it is a great achievement that some 30,000 young people have been placed in high-quality training and work experience options and some 5,500 lone parents have been helped into work. However, we are in the early stages. The Committee's report underlines the fact that it is too early to start drawing conclusions about the success or otherwise of the programmes, but the progress that has been made so far is very heartening.

The hon. Member for Havant accused my hon. Friends of being so swept along by their enthusiasm for successful case histories that they neglected the dispassionate analysis that he attempted. I would accuse him of the converse failure: he was so concerned to stick to what he thought was dispassionate analysis that he wholly overlooked the human and real benefits of a programme that is bringing hope and opportunity to many thousands of our fellow citizens. For example, my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley mentioned a constituent who said that her experience of the new deal was that it was the first time that she had ever been taken seriously. That is typical of the comments that I have heard from many new deal participants and their advisers.

I commend my hon. Friends for the energy that they have put into promoting the new deal programme and understanding how it is working locally. They have worked with employers, the voluntary sector and the Employment Service to make the new deal better. It is an innovation of the new deal that it has involved Members of Parliament—especially my hon. Friends, but also Liberal Democrat Members and even some Conservative Members—in actively supporting and promoting the programme in their areas. That is a valuable and—to the clients, employers and the Employment Service—valued role for Members of Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth (Mr. Healey) raised the important question of the scope of the new deal to generate additional jobs. I was struck by the evidence that the Committee found, especially from its studies in Cornwall, of small businesses taking on people whom they would not have employed before because they could not have taken the risk without the support of the new deal.

That is certainly being studied as part of our evaluation strategy for the new deal. My hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth asked for details of the surveys. Two will be undertaken: a qualitative survey in May and June 1999, which will be published in September; and a quantitative survey next September, which will be published in April 2000, or by July at the latest. A further important milestone in new deal evaluation, which will address the questions of several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Havant, is the macro-analysis of the effectiveness of the new deal, which will be published next September. It would greatly surprise me if that had nothing to say about the issues raised.

I am a little sceptical of the argument by my hon. Friend the Member for Wentworth that it would make sense to probe employers at the point at which they sign a new deal agreement or take on a new deal recruit as to whether an extra job had been generated. Some employers might suspect the motive behind that question, feeling that, if they gave the wrong answer, the subsidy might be withdrawn. We must be careful. Like my hon. Friend, I want to collect all available evidence and to publish an unprecedented amount of it. I thank my hon. Friends who have paid tribute to the publication of information about

the new deal. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I shall continue to be much more open about publication than any of our predecessors ever were.

Mr. Willetts: The Minister has claimed that new deal jobs cost £1,000 per extra job. On what basis does he make that calculation if he is claiming that he does not have the statistics?

Mr. Smith: The estimate is based on the unit cost of the different steps that people took to get on to the new deal. For example, for those going into unsubsidised jobs, the estimate is based on an estimate of the cost of the help that they received in the gateway before entering the job. For those who have moved into subsidised jobs, the estimate is based on the cost of the gateway plus the cost of the subsidy and their support in the job.

The hon. Member for Havant and his hon. Friends will regret having slung around their necks the ridiculous millstone of an £11,000-plus cost of new jobs. That is like waiting until week two of the operation of the channel tunnel and claiming that every passenger going through it on a train is costing millions of pounds. The hon. Gentleman loads the whole budget against the first people.

Mr. Willetts: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Smith: No, let the hon. Gentleman listen to a lecture in elementary economics. He is fond of lecturing us on that. His figures are a ludicrous, extravagant, cynical fabrication, and they do a disservice to all the people throughout the country who are working hard to make a success of the new deal. They do a grave disservice to new deal participants, who appreciate the new hope and opportunity that the programme is bringing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) made an important point. I was pleased to hear my hon. Friend and others refer to the success and the revolutionary approach that the new deal for lone parents represents. I can assure my hon. Friend that there is no difference in philosophy between our approaches to the two programmes. Both are about employability, about helping people forward and about helping people into work if work is the appropriate option and choice for them. Both programmes are bringing new hope and opportunity to thousands of people who were denied it so badly by the Conservative party.

On the letter and advice being sent to new parents under the new deal, let me assure my hon. Friends that we shall send out new information in the new year. It will give even more emphasis to the range of help available, training opportunities, help with child care and transport costs and much more. As for the text of the letter, the publication of our other promotional material will provide an opportune moment at which to revisit the wording on the education and training opportunities that are available to see whether it can be made still clearer.

We are proud of the new deals. We are proud of the new deal for young people, the new deal for older, long-term unemployed people which is coming on stream, the new deal for lone parents, and the new deal for disabled people, because they give new hope and opportunities to our country.

It being Ten o'clock, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded to put forthwith the deferred Questions which he was directed by paragraphs (4) and (5) of Standing Order No. 54 (Consideration of estimates) to put at that hour.*

VOTE ON ACCOUNT 1999–2000

Class IV, Vote 1

Resolved,

That a sum, not exceeding £2,299,414,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2000 for expenditure by the Home Office on police; the Forensic Science Service; registration of forensic practitioners; emergency planning; fire services; the Fire Service College; criminal policy and programmes including offender programmes; the prevention of drug abuse; crime reduction and prevention; provision of services relating to the Crime and Disorder Act; criminal justice service research; criminal injuries compensation; organised and international crime; control of immigration and nationality; issue of passports; community and constitutional services; firearms compensation and related matters; and on administration (excluding the provision for prisons administration carried on Class IV, Vote 2).

Class IV, Vote 2

Resolved,

That a sum, not exceeding £766, 651,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2000 for expenditure by the Home Office in England and Wales on prisons (including central administration and other costs arising from the detention of prisoners); placements in secure accommodation under Section 53 of the Children and Young Persons Act 1933; Prison Service colleges; the Parole Board; the storage and maintenance of equipment; transport management; grants to "Prisoners Abroad", and Welfare to Work Schemes.

Class 1, Vote 1

Resolved,

That a sum, not exceeding £6,826,077,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2000 for expenditure by the Department for Education and Employment on voluntary and special schools; the Assisted Places Scheme; the provision of education for under-fives; City Colleges and other specialist schools; grant-maintained schools and schools conducted by Education Associations; music and ballet schools; the school curriculum and its assessment; the youth service and other educational services and initiatives; careers guidance and services; payments for or in connection with teacher training; higher and further education provision and initiatives; loans to students, student awards and other student grants and their administration; the payment of access funds; reimbursement of fees for qualifying European Community students; compensation payments to teachers and staff of certain institutions; expenditure on other central government grants to local authorities; the provision of training and assessment programmes for young people and adults; initiatives to improve training and qualifications arrangements and access to these; the promotion of enterprise and the encouragement of self employment; payments for education, training and employment projects assisted by the European Community and refunds to the European Community; events associated with the UK presidency of the EU; the UK subscription to the ILO; help for unemployed people; the promotion of equal opportunities, disability rights, childcare provision and co-ordination of certain issues of particular importance to women; the payment of certain fees to the Home Office; the Department's own administration and research and that of Capita; information and publicity services; expenditure via Training and Enterprise Councils and amounts retained by them as surpluses and spent by them on training; other initiatives within their articles and memoranda of association; expenditure in connection with the sale of the student loans debt; and on expenditure in connection with the Welfare to Work Programme and Millennium Volunteers.

Class 1, Vote 3

Resolved,

That a sum, not exceeding £782,937,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2000 for expenditure by the Employment Service of the Department for Education and Employment on: measures to help people, particularly people who are unemployed and people with disabilities, into work; the elements of the delivery of the Jobseeker's Allowance undertaken by the Employment Service; the administration of, and where appropriate the payment of allowances to people participating in, the Welfare to Work programme and other employment programmes, pilot programmes and new measures to help people into work; the payment of temporary subsidies to employers; the payment of grants to voluntary bodies and local authorities towards the provision of supported employment; and grant in aid and the provision of a temporary loan facility to Remploy Limited; assistance and advice on employment service and labour market issues to international organisations; research; publicity; and administration.

Class XII

Resolved,

That a sum, not exceeding £22,716,706,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charge for the year ending on 31st March 2000 for expenditure by the Department of Social Security.

MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded to put forthwith the Questions which he was directed to put by Standing Order No. 55 (Questions on voting of estimates, etc.).*

ESTIMATES, 1998–99 (NAVY) VOTE A

Resolved,

That during the year ending on 31st March 1999 an additional number not exceeding 10 officers be maintained for Service in the Reserve Marine Forces.

SUPPLEMENTARY ESTIMATES, 1998–99

Resolved,

That a supplementary sum, not exceeding £924,068,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, to defray the charges for civil services which will come in the course of payment during the year ending on 31st March 1999, as set out in HC857 of Session 1997–98.

ESTIMATES, 1999–2000 (VOTE ON ACCOUNT)

Resolved,

That a further sum, not exceeding £69,610,689,000 be granted to Her Majesty out of the Consolidated Fund, on account, for or towards defraying the charges for civil and defence services in Class I, Votes 2 and 4; Classes II and III; Class IV, Vote 3; Classes V to XI; Classes XIII to XVIII; and Classes XVIII, A and XVIII, B for the year ending on 31st March 2000, as set out in HC1134, 1135 and 1136 of Session 1997–98.

Ordered,

That a Bill be brought in on the foregoing resolutions: And that the Chairman of Ways and Means, Mr. Chancellor of the Exchequer, Mr. Stephen Byers, Mr. Geoffrey Robinson, Dawn Primarolo and Ms Patricia Hewitt do prepare and bring it in.

CONSOLIDATED FUND (No. 2) BILL

Dawn Primarolo accordingly presented a Bill to apply certain sums out of the Consolidated Fund to the service of the years ending on 31st March 1999 and 2000: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Monday 14th December and to be printed [Bill 8].

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the Second Reading of the Greater London Authority Bill:

(a) at the sitting on Monday 14th December, proceedings thereon may continue, though opposed, until midnight; and

(b) at the sitting on Tuesday 15th December, the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings on Second Reading of the Bill at Seven o'clock.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

Ordered,

That at the sitting on Tuesday 15th December, Standing Order No. 16 (Proceedings under an Act or on European Union Documents) shall not apply to any Motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to fisheries, and the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings thereon not later than Ten o'clock.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

EUROPEAN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Mr. Russell Brown and Mrs. Linda Gilroy be discharged from the European Scrutiny Committee and Mr. Michael Connarty and Dr. Nick Palmer be added to the Committee.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

Mr. Rodney Ledward

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

10.3 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): At the outset, I should like to express my appreciation to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) and my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Mr. Duncan) for their presence tonight. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Mr. Green) and the hon. Member for Dover (Mr. Prosser) have told me that they have engagements in their constituencies, which is why they are not here.

The subject of this debate is the most painful that I have encountered in the fifteen and a half years that I have had the honour to represent the Folkestone and Hythe constituency in this place. It will be necessary for me to deal, however briefly, with some of the individual cases involved—cases of women who placed themselves in the care of a consultant gynaecologist, who gave him their trust and who have suffered physical and mental anguish ever since. Those cases will be harrowing to recount and distressing to listen to, not least for those who have already suffered so much.

Mr. Rodney Ledward worked as a consultant gynaecologist in south-east Kent between 1980 and 1996. He worked both in the national health service and in the private sector. In 1996, Mr. Ledward was dismissed by South Kent Hospitals NHS trust and removed from BUPA's list of approved consultants. In September 1998, the General Medical Council found him guilty of several cases of serious professional misconduct, and withdrew his professional registration.

At the latest count, about 418 of Mr. Ledward's former patients have contacted the South Kent Hospitals NHS trust or the South East Kent community health council, or both, to express their concerns about the treatment that they received while under his care. The South East Kent community health council, to whose chairman, Paul Watkins, and chief officer, Jean Howkins, I pay tribute, has called on the Secretary of State to hold a public inquiry into how these tragic cases were allowed to happen and into the lessons to be learned from them, both for the NHS and for the private sector. I support that call, and that is why I have asked for this debate.

To explain what happened, it is necessary to refer to some of the individual complaints that have been made. They include unnecessary and inappropriate surgical procedures, including hysterectomy, perforation of the bladder and the bowel causing incontinence and mental trauma following the discovery by women and their families that, unnecessarily, they could no longer give birth.

One woman was apparently left with a dead full-term baby inside her in the maternity ward for three days before being induced. Several women with mild stress incontinence had bladder repair surgery without the usual pre-operative investigation, which might well have led to alternative non-operative methods of treatment. Many patients are still grossly incontinent. I need hardly dwell on the blight that this has cast over their lives.

Many women had hysterectomies performed on them at an unusually young age. Some were in their 20s. Some have since been told that they were too young and that their hysterectomy was unnecessary. The consequences for them and their families are obvious and final. Many still suffer from very bad adhesions and have had to have further operations—in one case, as many as 17 further operations. Many are still in constant pain.

One woman had an ovary removed. Shortly after the operation, something burst and she was found to have 38 abscesses. She was readmitted to hospital and had to have a colostomy. She still suffers great pain.

Some women had their ovaries removed without consent. A number have reported being seen in the course of a NHS consultation and being told, quite wrongly, that the treatment that they needed was not available on the NHS.

There is one case that I shall describe rather more fully. It is the case of Brenda Johnson. In September 1994, she went to her general practitioner with bladder problems that were causing her concern. Her doctor referred her to Mr. Ledward, who said that she needed a repair, but would need a hysterectomy in six months' time. He suggested that she had a vaginal hysterectomy, which he said was a simple operation with no stitching, and that she would be fine within a few days. She was told that the waiting time for an NHS patient would be two years, but she could have the operation carried out within a few days privately in St. Saviour's hospital.

Mrs. Johnson says:

"You put your life and body into these surgeons' hands so you have to trust. I didn't think it was so severe and went back to my GP who agreed with me but said, 'Trust the surgeon, he may have seen something I haven't.' I asked around and was assured by other people who had hysterectomies it would be fine after a few weeks. With great reluctance I went ahead."

On Thursday 13 September 1984, aged 37, Mrs. Johnson was operated on at St. Saviour's hospital. She was bleeding after surgery and became very seriously ill as the evening wore on. Her anaesthetist saw her and contacted Mr. Ledward to say that she was in mortal danger. He did not return for many hours. Mrs. Johnson was in a terrible state and unconscious. Eventually further surgery took place. Mrs. Johnson's husband was called into the hospital in the early hours of the morning and told that she was dying. For five days she was barely conscious. She says:

"I was in absolute agony and kept under sedation with morphine. I had a blood transfusion in one arm, a saline drip in the other and a catheter. When I started to regain proper consciousness, after five days, I could hardly move a muscle and was in sheer agony. I thought, 'You wouldn't let a dog suffer like this.'"

Since then, Mrs. Johnson has suffered constant pain. To add insult to injury, the action that she brought to receive compensation for her pain and suffering was dismissed by the High Court. She has obtained no redress. I hope it may still be possible for that to be put right.

The questions that arise from Brenda Johnson's case and all the other cases are not difficult to identify. How could such a state of affairs have gone on for so long? When did the various authorities—the former South East Kent health authority, the former South East Thames regional health authority, the South Kent Hospitals NHS trust, St. Saviour's hospital, the General Medical Council—first become aware of concerns about Mr. Ledward's professional conduct and performance? How many complaints did they receive about him? What action did they take? What has happened to the medical records and consent forms of Mr. Ledward's former

[Mr. Michael Howard]

private patients, which are alleged to have disappeared or no longer to be available? Above all, what lessons can be learned from these tragic events to ensure that, so far as it is humanly possible to do so, nothing like them ever happens again?

Dr. Howard Stoate (Dartford): I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. Does he believe that, were the complaints procedures in private hospitals to be the same as in NHS hospitals, that might have alleviated some of the problems about which we have heard tonight?

Mr. Howard: I shall come to that. I fear that the course of events in the national health service in these cases does not enable me to answer that question with a simple yes. We would be wrong and utterly complacent if we assumed that complaints procedures in the NHS are anything like all they should be. However, I entirely agree that more should be done in relation to the regulation of the private sector. I shall deal with that point.

I do not lightly ask for a public inquiry. The Minister will probably tell us how expensive it would be and how much time it would take, but I do not see what other means there is to satisfy public concerns on the matter. My constituents who have suffered want to know the course of the investigations. They want to know that all the right questions are being asked and that all the answers have been tested.

Comparisons will inevitably be drawn with the public inquiry that is taking place in Bristol. The tragic events that I have drawn to the attention of the House this evening are, in my view, at least as serious as the events that led to the Bristol inquiry. Moreover, those events raise questions that will not be covered by the Bristol inquiry. In particular, they raise questions about the private sector in health care and the need for it to be effectively regulated. I understand that those involved in the provision of private health care would welcome such regulation. Indeed, I am told that they have been asking for that, but so far their pleas have fallen on deaf ears.

Be that as it may, these questions, and the others that I have raised, are serious and weighty. South East Kent community health council—an authoritative and serious body—reached the conclusion that they would be answered effectively only by a public inquiry. I agree with its conclusion, as does my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford and the hon. Member for Dover. I hope that the Minister will tell us that he agrees, too.

10.15 pm

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): I congratulate the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) on securing the debate. He and I would prefer not to be having it, but it is important, especially for the women patients who have been affected by the appalling practice of one hospital consultant, Mr. Rodney Ledward.

Let me say at the outset how sorry I am—on behalf of the whole Government and, I believe, the whole House—to all the women who have been affected by Mr. Ledward's activities. They should never have had to experience the physical and mental distress that the right hon. and learned Gentleman outlined so graphically.

Like every other person who has had any contact with these events, I am appalled by two things: Mr. Ledward's activities and the fact that they were allowed to go on for so long. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has set out very clearly his views—and, quite rightly, the views of his constituents—on these matters. Let me express my own views about Mr. Rodney Ledward. He was an incompetent, irresponsible and arrogant surgeon who seemingly had little or no regard for his patients. Women came to him when they were feeling vulnerable and scared, expecting first-class treatment. Instead, he caused a catalogue of harm, which is both horrific and unforgivable.

Mr. Ledward has not only undermined confidence in services at South Kent Hospitals NHS trust, but has damaged public confidence throughout the health care system. Since the days of Mr. Ledward, the trust, as the right hon. and learned Gentleman knows, has recruited new doctors to its obstetrics and gynaecology department, and has also set in place new quality control procedures.

Let me describe the three ways in which the Government and the health service are responding to these events, and respond to the specific points made by the right hon. and learned Gentleman. First, the immediate priority has been to identify former patients of Mr. Ledward who might need help. The trust shares my deep concern, and that of the right hon. and learned Gentleman, about the activities of Mr. Ledward. It is making every effort to assist any former patients. I am pleased that the local community health council has commended the trust for dealing with the situation in an open and responsive way since Mr. Ledward was struck off by the General Medical Council.

Special arrangements have been set in place to help former patients. The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right to say that, to date, 418 patients have called South Kent Hospitals NHS trust. I can tell him that 168 have already been seen. Preliminary analysis shows that 22 NHS and 15 private patients may have suffered injury as a result of an operation by Mr. Ledward.

I would encourage any former patients of Mr. Ledward to contact the trust, if they have not already done so. It will then assess, quite properly, each patient's needs, and provide appropriate services, including medical care, counselling, claims for compensation or simply the facility to talk through any problems or concerns that they may have.

Secondly, I shall describe how we are investigating the background to these awful events. I have heard the right hon. and learned Gentleman's call for an independent public inquiry. As he knows, he is not alone in calling for such an inquiry. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I will consider those views extremely carefully, and make an announcement as soon as possible on how we intend to proceed. I promise him that, whatever happens, the Government will publish the facts, so that the patients affected, the public and national health service staff can see how those events unfolded.

What I can tell the right hon. and learned Gentleman this evening is that, after the General Medical Council decision and after serious concerns were raised by a number of Mr. Ledward's former patients, including the right hon. and learned Gentleman's constituents, the Secretary of State instructed the NHS trust to carry out an urgent internal review of the circumstances leading up to

Mr. Ledward's dismissal, and to report to the Secretary of State. That report has now been received, and has provided a useful starting point. However, it has raised even more questions, to which I have asked the NHS trust to provide answers. I want to be able to provide as comprehensive an answer as possible to all the questions the right hon. and learned Gentleman and others have posed.

Let me give the right hon. and learned Gentleman a flavour of just some of the questions that have been prompted by the preliminary analysis. Why did no alarm bells sound when Mr. Ledward apparently had 12 medical litigation cases against him in the years from 1983? Given that concerns were apparently raised about Mr. Ledward with the regional health authority as early as 1991, why was nothing done? Why was no investigation prompted when, in 1994, following a serious complication involving surgery by Mr. Ledward on a female patient, he apparently agreed to be on call for his own patients?

Given that doctors appointed to Mr. Ledward's department were apparently told, at the time of their appointment, that there were concerns about the department that they were joining, why was nothing done? If it is true that serious concerns were raised about Mr. Ledward's practice in 1995, in relation to his attitude to patients, his unnecessary roughness during physical examinations of those patients, his unnecessary highlighting of private practice options to NHS patients, and his non-attendance at NHS ante-natal clinics, how is it that subsequently nothing was done?

Why did not the standard-setting role of the royal colleges manage to penetrate the world in which Mr. Ledward operated? Why was Mr. Ledward in charge of clinical audit in that hospital from 1989-96? How did policies in place in the health service at that time fail to prevent or detect and stop those horrendous events?

Those are only some of the questions that are raised by this deplorable case. We are determined to get answers to them all, and to the questions that the right hon. and learned Gentleman and his constituents are asking. The existing evidence reveals that the problem has a long history. Inadequate mechanisms were in place for dealing with it and, most appallingly of all, the women affected by it were the last to know what on earth was going on. That is what is most deplorable about all this.

The third issue is how we are now seeking to ensure that such a tragedy is never repeated. It is important to stress that, overwhelmingly in the national health service, patients receive safe and effective care and treatment day in, day out. Most doctors do an excellent job, but when things go wrong, in the NHS or elsewhere, it is patients who suffer. As we see in this case, the consequences can be appalling. As the right hon. and learned Gentleman rightly said, nobody pretends that mistakes will not happen. They will. Doctors, clinicians and others working in any health care system are only human.

However, failings such as these highlight the need for new safeguards. We need to develop a new culture of openness in the NHS that acknowledges, highlights and deals with problems promptly, rather than pretending that they do not exist. The preliminary evidence in this case shows overwhelmingly that that was the problem in the hospital in question. We also need a new system of quality assurance that supports clinicians in developing and maintaining good practice, and that nips problems in the bud.

The chairman of the British Medical Association, Dr. Ian Bogle, recently wrote:

"the days when doctors thought they could turn a blind eye to the incompetence of their colleagues have gone."

Dr. Bogle is right. It is in no one's interests—neither patient nor doctor—to cover up cases of outright failure.

The Government believe that new safeguards are necessary for patient safety and public confidence. We are taking five important steps. First, we are establishing a new duty of clinical governance to put quality assurance systems in place in all parts of the NHS. Secondly, we are placing a new emphasis on publishing clinical outcome data, so that results can be compared over time and between clinical teams. Thirdly, all doctors will in future be required to participate in a national audit programme, including specialty and sub-specialty national external audit programmes, to ensure that their performance is up to scratch. Fourthly, individual doctors will be required to share their results with the medical director of their NHS trust and the trust's lead clinician for clinical governance. Fifthly, a new external body—the commission for health improvement—will be established, whose job will be to monitor quality standards externally and to intervene promptly if necessary when things are going wrong, as they clearly were in the case of Mr. Rodney Ledward.

Those five points summarise the action that the Government are taking. The medical profession, too, has to play its full part. I believe that the leadership of the profession recognises the need for change, but that recognition must be matched by a commitment from the profession as a whole to take prompt and effective action. Without that, the whole system of professional self-regulation will not command the public's confidence.

The Government, like the profession, want professional self-regulation to work, but no one should be in any doubt that the system is under test. It must become more modern, more open and more accountable. If professional self-regulation is to be the bedrock of high clinical standards in the future, it cannot operate in isolation. It must form part of an integrated framework of new mechanisms that embrace the profession, the regulatory machinery, the educational bodies and the NHS.

I know that all this comes too late for the women who suffered at the hands of Mr. Ledward. We shall do everything that we can to help them. We shall get to the bottom of how Mr. Ledward was allowed to wreak such damage on so many of them, and we shall learn the lessons of these terrible events, so that we can do our very best to ensure that patients in the future are protected from bad doctors such as Mr. Ledward.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-nine minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Monday 14 December 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Oflot

1. **Mr. Christopher Chope** (Christchurch): When he last met the Director General of Oflot to discuss the terms and conditions of the lottery operator's licence. [62126]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): I have regular meetings with the director general at which we discuss a range of issues. The most recent such meeting was on 22 October.

Mr. Chope: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that reply. Does he recall that one of the original justifications for having a United Kingdom national lottery was the fact that if we did not have one, foreign lottery operators would be allowed to operate in this country and we would not have any competition to put up against them? Now that Camelot has proved so successful and seen off competition in the home market, does he not think that it is time for the lottery operator to be allowed to sell lottery tickets overseas so that we can get even more remuneration for our favourite causes in this country?

Mr. Smith: Camelot is considering that. The consent of the Director General of Oflot is required before the idea can proceed, and I am sure that he will consider it carefully. If the idea goes ahead, I hope that Camelot secures a better deal for the lottery players of this country than the hon. Gentleman did for the people of this country when he privatised the Property Services Agency.

Tourism Strategy

3. **Shona McIsaac** (Cleethorpes): What plans he has to ensure that the tourism strategy includes assistance to seaside towns in respect of their provision of affordable family holidays. [62128]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): The new tourism strategy will be comprehensive. It will include proposals for action to increase access to tourism for all and practical suggestions on regeneration for seaside towns.

Shona McIsaac: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I have one specific question on the tourism strategy: will any money be available for seaside regeneration?

Mr. Smith: Funds can be made available in various ways to assist with regeneration. It has been announced that more than £3.8 billion will be available from the single regeneration budget, which is in the care of my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. Some of that money will be available to tackle pockets of deprivation, particularly in coastal towns. I understand that 44 of the bids received so far have included proposals for regeneration in seaside towns. Support from the national lottery can also go to such towns for the restoration of piers and other projects. In addition, I was able to announce this morning that our proposals for a streamlined body to support and foster tourism in England will enable more money to go to the regions to support tourism.

Mr. Ronnie Fearn (Southport): Will the Secretary of State take cognisance of what was said at the British Resorts Association conference, which unfortunately he could not attend? Representatives of every resort said what difficult times they were facing. It looks as though they have a bleak future. Is there any help in the strategy for hoteliers who require grants or other help towards refurbishing their premises?

Mr. Smith: I am well aware of the good work done by the British Resorts Association in supporting and fostering the work of all resort towns, not just seaside towns. We shall keep in regular contact on how the Government can best assist the association in ensuring that our resort towns have a flourishing future rather than a decaying one.

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there are many opportunities for local authorities to encourage families to visit seaside resorts? I draw to his attention the initiatives of Blackpool and Wyre borough councils in staging arts events aimed specifically at children and families. In Fleetwood, children have been learning how to juggle and walk on stilts at a circus workshop. The programme is free, so it is affordable for families. Does my right hon. Friend agree that local authorities should be encouraged to adopt such a lively and imaginative way of encouraging and inviting families to come to seaside resorts?

Mr. Smith: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend. She has given a good example of how local authorities can take imaginative initiatives. She will also be aware from this morning's announcement that the additional funds that we have been able to make available to the Arts Council of England will ensure that much more money goes to the regional arts boards to enable more such work.

Mr. Richard Spring (West Suffolk): The Secretary of State will be aware of the anxiety in our traditional seaside resorts about the future of tourism, arising from the

current economic climate, which has led to the biggest deficit in tourism in this country's history. Will he assure the House that when the continually delayed tourism strategy is finally unveiled, it will address the needs of seaside resorts specifically?

Mr. Smith: Yes.

Museums and Galleries (Children's Access)

4. **Mr. Tony McNulty** (Harrow, East): What his plans are to improve access for children to museums and galleries. [62129]

The Minister for Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): As my right hon. Friend announced this morning, funds will be made available to allow the trustees of the national museums and galleries that charge for entry to introduce free admission for children from April 1999. That will apply both to main sites and to branch museums.

Mr. McNulty: I thank my hon. Friend for that welcome news, but can he clarify whether that means that children will have free access to museums and galleries when they are not in a school party? Can he also enlighten me a little more on what joined-up or grown-up thinking the Department has about sharing that key educational resource with other Departments?

Mr. Howarth: I can encourage my hon. Friend on both points. For example, until now, children who visited the Science museum in a school party gained free admission, but did not if they visited it on their own—other than at certain times of the week—or with their families. The Science museum will now have the opportunity to offer them free admission on all occasions, and I am pleased to understand that it is its wish to take up that offer.

My hon. Friend rightly draws attention to the need for co-ordinated policy development on education. He will have noted, for example, that the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, South (Mr. Clarke), announced a £140,000 fund to support schools to work with museums and galleries to provide innovative learning opportunities out of school hours. We are developing an agenda with the Department for Education and Employment on a number of fronts, because our museums and galleries are a wonderful educational resource.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): The announcement made today, which has been referred to, was described in the accompanying press release as the

"biggest ever reform of cultural funding and organisation".

Is not it absolutely typical that, instead of the announcement being made in the House, it was made at 10 o'clock this morning at the Tate gallery?

Is not it a tragic misdirection of funds that nearly £100 million—which could have been of real value to museums throughout the country, including children's museums such as the Roald Dahl museum—will go to a handful of mainly metropolitan museums in an attempt to compensate for the cost of free admission? Surely that is a wasteful exercise in ideology, which will benefit few children, many of whom already get into museums for nothing.

Will the Minister confirm that the chief beneficiaries of that policy will be overseas tourists and, of course, Her Majesty's Treasury, which will benefit to the tune of tens of millions of pounds a year in VAT receipts that it did not previously get? When will the Government stop using arts policy as a tool of dogmatic Labour party policy?

Mr. Howarth: It would appear, unfortunately, that the hon. Gentleman may have neglected to read parliamentary answers last week. I refer him to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Mr. Miller) on Thursday 10 December, in which the relevant announcement was duly and properly made to the House. The briefing given this morning was supplementary to that.

The principal beneficiaries of the policies that we have announced will be children, and I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is happy to contemplate the continuation of charging, which acts as a barrier to children experiencing great art and getting to know the great collections of our museums.

Of course other policies and funds are designed to enable more and more people to enjoy the treasures of our museums; for example, a £15 million challenge fund supports the designated collections and a £7 million access fund from the heritage lottery fund supports museums and galleries. As we have already announced, the heritage lottery fund will enjoy an extra £50 million to use between now and 2001, and it has been confirmed that it will continue to receive 16⅔ per cent. of the proceeds of the national lottery. Thereafter, the regional cultural forums will engage local authorities much more closely in developing an integrated policy across the country. We have much in hand to improve access to and enhance the educational activities of museums and galleries across the country.

Television Coverage (Sports)

5. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): What representations he has received from low-income groups regarding access to sporting events on television. [62130]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): My right hon. Friend received more than 700 representations on access to sporting events on television during his review of the list, and a significant number expressed concern about the availability of broadcasts of major events to people on low incomes. The Government believe that broadcasts of the most important sporting events should be available to all, and for that reason my right hon. Friend announced a revised list in June, which extends protection to more events than ever before.

Mr. Pike: I welcome my hon. Friend's answer but I am sure that she will recognise that many low income families cannot afford to take children to a football match at Stamford Bridge or at even Turf Moor in her constituency. Those families depend on television to watch sport and regret that it is increasingly being shown on cable, satellite and pay per view. Will the Government ensure that people can continue to see not only the major national events but other sports throughout the year?

Janet Anderson: I understand my hon. Friend's concern and I am well aware of the price of tickets for

football matches these days. However, the five terrestrial channels continue to offer coverage of all major sports. In the past few weeks, they have shown domestic and European football, the climax of the Grand Prix motor racing championship and a number of rugby union internationals in addition to the listed events for which free-to-air coverage can be protected by the Independent Television Commission.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): One low income group that finds it extremely difficult to travel to sporting events is the pensioners. What are the Government's plans to enable pensioners to see more sport on television? As the licence fee goes up, the amount of sport on television dramatically goes down.

Janet Anderson: The hon. Lady will know that we have announced a review of the licence fee. As part of that review, detailed consideration will be given to the current concessionary scheme, which we have acknowledged to be unfair and unsatisfactory.

Analogue Television Transmissions

6. **Mr. Austin Mitchell** (Great Grimsby): What proposals he has for fixing a final date for broadcasting analogue television transmissions. [62131]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): We are considering the responses that we received over the summer to our consultation paper "Television: the Digital Future", which sought views on a range of issues relating to the migration from analogue to digital broadcasting. Those responses covered a wide range of views and I shall announce the Government's intentions in taking the issue forward in due course.

Mr. Mitchell: May I express my hope that my right hon. Friend will leave fixing a date for the end of analogue transmissions until as late as possible and make that date as far away as possible so that the less well off are not forced into what will still be the considerable expense of going digital?

Mr. Smith: I entirely understand and share my hon. Friend's concern. We made it clear in our consultation paper that analogue television transmissions should not be switched off until digital television is as universally available as analogue currently is. We have only to look across the Atlantic to see the dangers of setting a date with great enthusiasm too early which then has to be reconsidered. We do not want to go that way.

Mr. Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley): The Secretary of State said that we should wait until digital television is universally available, but the point is whether digital is universally affordable. What assurances can he give the many people who are on fixed incomes and may not be able to afford the new equipment that they will not be disadvantaged by the disappearance of analogue?

Mr. Smith: We certainly do not want to engineer a situation in which people who cannot afford to are forced to pay for new equipment to receive digital television. That is a crucial consideration, which we spelt out in the documents that we issued for consultation.

Sports Council (Lottery Funds)

7. **Ms Oona King** (Bethnal Green and Bow): What measures he has taken to ensure that children in inner-city areas benefit from Sports Council lottery funds. [62133]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Tony Banks): Through measures introduced in the National Lottery Act 1998, we have taken steps to ensure that all people in inner cities will be able to benefit further from funding available from the lottery sports fund.

Ms King: I have come from an excellent youth action scheme project in my constituency, which, among other things, aims to increase sporting facilities in Tower Hamlets. Will my hon. Friend explain how people in deprived areas who are not able to raise the 35 per cent. of the funds necessary for a project will be able to gain access to lottery sports funds?

Mr. Banks: Independent studies have shown a threefold increase in the number of young people playing sport through initiatives funded by the national lottery. The new policy directions issued to the English Sports Council in June stressed the importance of lottery funds in opening up further opportunities for children and young people and in encouraging regeneration and combating social deprivation. We look forward to seeing how the ESC will tackle the matter in its lottery strategy, which will be published next spring. The ESC is aware that those parts of the country that are most in need of new or improved facilities tend to be the poorest, and its priority area initiative provides lottery funding of up to 90 per cent. instead of the usual 65 per cent.

Mr. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield): The threefold increase announced by the Minister is good news and demonstrates the success of the lottery funds. However, what consolation can he give those sporting bodies which have applied for moneys, only to be told by the Sports Council that, suddenly, no moneys are available? The Minister for Arts has written to me to say that, in the next two years, the Sports Council could have access to as little as 5 per cent. of the amount now available to it because money has been diverted into the new opportunities fund. The figure of 16⅔ cent. is agreed only from 2001. Why has the money been siphoned away? What moneys will be available in the next two years?

Mr. Banks: Money has not been siphoned away, and the 16⅔ per cent. is guaranteed to 2001 and beyond, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has made clear to the House. As I have said on a number of occasions, it would be quite inconceivable for us to drop sport or arts from the list of good causes. It is nonsense to suggest that. The hon. Gentleman has referred to how much money has gone from the lottery to sport. So far, sports-related projects have benefited by up to £1 billion from the lottery, and such support will continue. I do not understand the fuss that the hon. Gentleman is making. He is just being alarmist because all the evidence shows that sport has benefited enormously from the lottery, and will continue to do so beyond 2001.

Mr. Bill O'Brien (Normanton): I thank my hon. Friend for his encouraging response to the original question.

Does he accept many urban areas—particularly the former coal mining areas—suffer from deprivation following the loss of highly paid jobs? Many such areas are now losing their swimming pools because their maintenance cannot be upheld. Will my hon. Friend assure me that the Sports Council will pay serious regard to applications to rebuild swimming pools in deprived areas, particularly in mining areas?

Mr. Banks: We pay close attention to facilities in former mining areas through the coalfields initiative, and we have had a series of successful conferences recently to discuss the specific point that my hon. Friend has raised. It is important to make sure that we can fund people as well as projects, and we will do that following our revisions in the National Lottery Act 1998. All projects that come before the sports lottery board must show that they are viable in the long run; otherwise, we will have facilities around the country for which there is insufficient revenue funding. We are acutely aware of the need to make sure that particularly deprived areas—I specify the coalfield areas—receive the maximum support through the national lottery.

Royal Opera House

8. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): How much the current closure of the Royal Opera house is costing public funds. [62134]

The Minister for Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): The Arts Council of England awarded a grant of £20 million to the Royal Opera house from the national lottery towards the costs of closure while the theatre is being redeveloped.

Mr. Jack: This morning the Secretary of State said on "Today"—yet another media briefing before any statement to this House—that he wanted every pound of his budget to be spent efficiently and effectively. I am sure that he and the Minister will have read the December edition of the magazine *Equity Journal*, which recounted a tale of financial incompetence in the running of the Royal Opera house. The possibility of more public funding for that sorry institution is being discussed. Before that is paid over, will the Secretary of State assure me that he will follow the example of his right hon. Friend the Chancellor and subject the way in which the Royal Opera house project has been run to date, and will be run in the future, to the scrutiny of the National Audit Office, so that we may be assured that it is using public money effectively and efficiently? If he will not do that, will he tell the House why not?

Mr. Howarth: The right hon. Gentleman was a Treasury Minister in the previous Administration when the finances of the Royal Opera house were allowed to get out of hand. Under the previous Government, the arts had the worst of all worlds, as they not only cut the funding but failed properly to invigilate the use of publicly provided money at the Royal Opera house. We have put in a new board, which has negotiated new agreements on working practices, and we have secured renewed commitment from the donors and the Arts Council. As a condition of any addition in funding that the Arts Council will announce, we are insisting that there must be proper administration and management standards at the Royal Opera house. That is in stark contrast to the standards over which the previous Government, of which the right hon. Gentleman was a member, presided.

Mr. Huw Edwards (Monmouth): Does my hon. Friend agree that there has been a culture of elitism in the Royal Opera house that has excluded many opera lovers, but that the principles of access and excellence are entirely compatible? What guarantee can he give that, when the Royal Opera house reopens, there will be a fair proportion of affordable seats?

Mr. Howarth: My hon. Friend will agree that we must make a distinction between artistic elitism, which we whole-heartedly support—we are fully committed to ensuring that world-class opera and ballet continue to be performed in Britain, and I think that we all share that objective—and social exclusivity, which has characterised the Royal Opera house far too much. It will be a condition of any increase in Arts Council funding that there must be, for example, a revised ticket pricing structure, to ensure that people of average and modest means have the opportunity to enjoy the wonderful experiences that will be available in the newly reopened opera house next year.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): Before the Minister gets carried away by his vision of the people's opera, will he confirm that all future arrangements for the Royal Opera house lie with the Arts Council, however much it has been damaged in recent months, and not with interfering Ministers? Would not he consider it bizarre if, at the end of the redevelopment programme, there were more subsidy and fewer performances?

Mr. Howarth: The right hon. Member for Fylde (Mr. Jack) has just castigated us for—in his view—having insufficient regard to ensuring that there was proper management at the Royal Opera house, while the hon. Gentleman seems to think that we should take an entirely hands-off approach. I hope that he will accept that the Government have a responsibility for stewardship of public money, albeit that decisions on public funding are taken in particular instances by the Arts Council. I am satisfied that arrangements will be announced and policies pursued at the opera house that will enable its finances to be stabilised and excellence to flourish. In future, lyric theatre at the opera house will be available to more and more people, and that is surely something for which we should all aim.

Mr. Denis MacShane (Rotherham): Is the Minister aware that Labour Members who are opera lovers do not really care whether Covent Garden is open or shut, because we cannot afford to go there unless we have a second job, as the Tories do, or we are an arts Minister and get freebies? If he is taking a policy line on opera, could he have a word with English National Opera and suggest that it changes its name to European National Opera and starts staging operas in the language in which they were written? Whenever I go to the ENO, where I have seen some marvellous productions over the years, I cannot understand a word that is sung in English in Mozart and Puccini operas. If the fat ladies and thin gentlemen were to start singing in German and Italian, we would all enjoy it a lot more.

Mr. Howarth: The whole House always enjoys my hon. Friend's arias.

Sport (Young People)

9. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): What steps he is taking to encourage greater levels of participation in sport among young people. [62135]

The Minister for Sport (Mr. Tony Banks): We are working with the English Sports Council on a number of schemes for young people through the national junior sport programme, such as Top Play and BT Top Sport, on which the English Sports Council works closely with the Youth Sport Trust. There is also the sporting ambassadors scheme, a new scheme to provide opportunities for successful sportsmen and sportswomen of all ages to visit schools to enthuse young people about the benefits of physical activity and a healthy life style.

The national junior sport programme actively encourages all governing bodies of sport to have programmes in place to promote our sport for all policy and increase participation in all sports, from the grass roots through to elite competitors.

Mr. Bercow: I am grateful for that reply. Does the Minister recall telling the House on 5 June 1998 that primary school children should undertake a minimum of three hours of sport a week in school? In the 192 days that have elapsed since that confident statement, what progress has the Minister made?

Mr. Banks: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his compendious memory. What a sad person he must be to store such great detail. At the time, I was expressing what I saw as a desirable objective. I assume that the hon. Gentleman knows that neither the Secretary of State for Education and Employment nor I, in my humble position in another Department, can specify the number of hours spent on each subject of the national curriculum. I mentioned what I saw as a desirable objective and I am doing my best to encourage others to see my point of view, not always successfully.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): May I thank the Minister for welcoming the work of the Youth Sport Trust which, as he knows, is based in my constituency in Loughborough? It has had an enormous impact in bringing sport back into schools, especially primary schools, through the BT Top Sport programme. What representations has my hon. Friend made to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment to increase the levels of participation in schools? Education is a key area in which we can make a difference. What impact has the sale of school playing fields over the past 15 years had on the amount of sport played in schools?

Mr. Banks: I associate myself entirely with my hon. Friend's views on the Youth Sport Trust, which is a wonderful organisation. My congratulations go to Sue Campbell and her staff on their achievements in giving equipment to primary schools to enable young children to get used to sport. That is a wonderful thing to do.

The School Curriculum and Assessment Authority is considering revisions to the curriculum, and formal and informal consultations will take place next year. I hope that everybody who feels as strongly as I do about the role of physical education in schools will make representations. My hon. Friend can rest assured that I will do so, and I hope that my views will be listened to.

One of the first decisions this Government took was to stop the sale of school playing fields, which was an appalling act inflicted on schools by the Conservative Government. It clearly had an impact on the level of recreational facilities in schools. As one of my hon. Friends has said, it has affected our ability to perform well at cricket. The Conservatives, therefore, are entirely responsible for what is going on in Australia at the moment.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth (East Surrey): Is it not true that the Minister does not have a clue how to arrest the decline of sport in our schools? While I understand his desire to get away from it all on exotic foreign trips, which is presumably where he picks up all his banana skins, does he accept that for the time being—although it may not be for long—he has responsibility for the future of sport and it cannot be met by keeping his fingers crossed and shooting his mouth off into his own goal?

Mr. Banks: I must say that on one of my state visits to Parliament it is a bit much to be insulted at the Dispatch Box by a Kevin Keegan lookalike. My work abroad is in pursuit of affecting the decision on 2006 and it is hard graft. The hon. Gentleman does not know how hard I have to work when I am abroad on behalf of the country and our great national game of football.

I shall continue to make representations to the Department for Education and Employment, but the decisions are for Ministers in that Department. All I can do is use the best offices I can muster to try to encourage the continued playing of sport in schools. The Government recognise that physical education is an important part of the national curriculum, and it will remain so.

Mr. John Maxton (Glasgow, Cathcart): While it is important that leading sports personalities should visit schools to encourage youngsters to take part in sport, is not it equally essential that that should be followed up by the closest possible liaison between sports bodies and clubs and local schools so that the clubs can provide the coaching and organisation that the schools are now often incapable of providing?

Mr. Banks: There is obviously a role for greater co-ordination between schools and sports clubs. There is also concern that while sporting facilities and opportunities are available in schools, there is a gap immediately after that. The English Sports Council is particularly keen on closer liaison, which is absolutely essential.

I hope that my hon. Friend is encouraged by the after school clubs that are linking, for example, football clubs with local schools. I attended a wonderful launch at West Ham football club recently along with kids from local schools. Every school in Newham wants to get involved in the scheme, because there is a magic in getting into a local football club. The kids are receptive, and they want to learn. They are putting in more hours than they are asked for because sport can inspire children as well as putting them in a mood that makes them more receptive to learning. I consider getting such things right as an essential part of my job.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): I welcome the importance that the Minister attaches to retaining school playing fields, but is he aware that a great many other playing fields are under threat? In my area, the borough of Trafford has two proposals to build houses on playing fields belonging to Bowdon cricket and hockey club and to the local authority. Will the Minister turn his attention to retaining that type of sporting facility?

Mr. Banks: I understand that Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions planning guidelines will take that point into consideration. There are many under-utilised recreational facilities around the country, and I have tried to link up with some clearly under-utilised company sports grounds. Banks and commercial institutions used to provide wonderful facilities for their staff, but as technology has advanced and staff numbers have shrunk, those facilities have become under-used. At the Kodak company fun day recently, I found that Kodak is working with the community and a private sector provider to utilise recreational facilities, and several such initiatives are happening. I welcome the support of the hon. Member for Altrincham and Sale, West (Mr. Brady) for what we are doing.

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): Will the Minister reflect on the fact that one thing lost in schools over the past 30 years is ground staff? Will he compare that fact with the position in our parks, where our cricket fields have been dug up and our football fields have gone? Will he think again about the science of ground staff work, and its place at the National Institute of Sport?

Mr. Banks: I am considering asking my agent to seek a transfer for me to the Department for Education and Employment, as many questions to me could equally be directed to my right hon. and hon. Friends there. Yes, of course there is a science involved in ground staff work. Clearly, for example, we need the ability to prepare cricket tables in a way that might offer us more opportunity of winning, a science in which, perhaps, we lag at present.

Channel 3 Licences

10. **Mr. Steve Webb** (Northavon): What will be the aggregate payment to Government from Channel 3 licences in 1999; and what is the corresponding figure for 1998. [62136]

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): Those broadcasters making payments to the Exchequer under the terms of the Broadcasting Act 1990 paid £423 million in 1997, the last year for which figures are available. Payments for 1998 will be of the same order, subject to the companies' performance in securing advertising and sponsorship income, on which part of the payments are based. It is not possible accurately to forecast the 1999 payment levels, which will be lower because of the renewal of eight of the 16 Channel 3 licences on different terms.

Mr. Webb: I am grateful to the Minister. Newspaper reports suggest that the ITV companies will receive a windfall of £75 million, and it occurs to me that that is a third of the cost of free television licences for the over-75s. The money that BSkyB is bidding for Manchester United would pay for free licences for that group for three years. However, the Government's review of the cost of concessionary television licences is restricted to BBC funding. Will the Minister extend that remit to see whether money can be found from commercial, satellite and cable television to provide free licences for old people?

Janet Anderson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. The review is about to commence and the concessionary licence scheme will be given detailed consideration but, in this review, will be restricted to BBC funding. As the Government have said on many occasions, we accept that the present system is unfair and unsatisfactory.

Cinemas

11. **Mr. Andrew F. Bennett** (Denton and Reddish): What recent discussions he has had about preserving examples of 1930s cinemas. [62138]

The Minister for Arts (Mr. Alan Howarth): I have regular meetings with English Heritage and other bodies on the subject. Last week, I met the Twentieth Century Society, which started its life as the Thirties Society.

Mr. Bennett: May I commend the Plaza cinema in Stockport, which is a listed building and a good example of a 1930s cinema? For the past 20 years, it has been hidden to most of my constituents behind the trappings of a bingo hall. Now that that business has ceased and the building is again available as a cinema and theatre, will my hon. Friend give the Stockport local authority and, perhaps, the National Trust every encouragement to consider buying the building and returning it to its original use?

Mr. Howarth: I congratulate my hon. Friend and also my hon. Friend the Member for Stockport (Ms Coffey) on their campaign to preserve that important building. Indeed, the campaign has all-party support. I understand that it is an exceptionally fine art deco building, with an impressive exterior and an even more impressive interior, which has successfully survived its incarnation as a bingo hall. English Heritage has advised me that it has a Compton organ with jelly-mould glass surround and large plaster friezes of dancing maidens. It is a listed building and I am pleased that Stockport borough council's development brief fully recognises the importance of the cinema's external appearance and unaltered art deco interior, and supports future use of the building as a cinema or arts performance centre. I will certainly consider what my hon. Friend suggests about the National Trust.

Millennium Projects (Public Transport)

13. **Mr. Jim Cousins** (Newcastle upon Tyne, Central): What study he has made of public transport access to millennium projects in Newcastle upon Tyne. [62140]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): All Millennium Commission projects are subject to a detailed appraisal process, undertaken by independent consultants, who consider the access and transport links involved. The Millennium Commission is supporting two projects in Newcastle: the International Centre for Life, adjacent to Newcastle Central station and close to bus and metro links; and the Baltic millennium bridge which spans the river between Gateshead and Newcastle and will increase accessibility to the area for pedestrians and cyclists.

Mr. Cousins: Will my right hon. Friend seriously consider the fact that, although public transport links for those projects are excellent, they depend on two things? First, that the quayside transit system to link the Baltic project with the city centre is in place and, secondly, on reasonably cheap fares to enable young people to come into Newcastle to enjoy not only the nightlife of the city, but the benefits of the two projects he outlined.

Mr. Smith: The specifics of my hon. Friend's question are matters for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, but as a Government we bear in mind, of course, the need for people to travel affordably and accessibly to such major attractions when putting forward our vision of an integrated transport policy.

Television Coverage (Sports)

14. **Mr. Iain Coleman** (Hammersmith and Fulham): If he will make a statement on the current arrangements to protect the public's rights to watch major sporting events on free-to-air television. [62141]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Mr. Chris Smith): I have consulted widely on criteria to inform the listing process and reviewed the list earlier this year with the help of an independent advisory committee. I revised the list in June and it now gives the Independent Television Commission power to protect coverage of more events than ever before for the general viewer.

Mr. Coleman: While I welcome my right hon. Friend's reply, bearing in mind the fact that in recent years the BBC has lost the right to cover, among other sports, rugby union internationals, motor racing Grand Prix and, most recently and most worryingly for some of us, test match cricket, what duties do public broadcasters have to ensure proper sports coverage on television?

Mr. Smith: It is part of the public service remit, in particular of the BBC but also of the other public service broadcasters, to ensure that sport plays a proper and major part in overall coverage and that the people of this country have a chance to see our best athletes, footballers and cricketers in operation. With that in mind, I take this opportunity to congratulate Michael Owen on becoming BBC "Sports Personality of the Year" and to wish him a happy 19th birthday today.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

The President of the Council was asked—

Hereditary Peers

32. **Dr. Ian Gibson** (Norwich, North): When she expects to introduce legislation ending the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote. [62161]

36. **Dr. George Turner** (North-West Norfolk): When she expects to introduce legislation to end the right of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. [62166]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The Government intend to introduce a Bill, and publish a White Paper, on Lords reform in the near future.

Dr. Gibson: Is my right hon. Friend aware that the tumbrels are ready for the viscounts and barons, and that people everywhere want both stages of this legislation to go through as fast as possible so that we can deliver our manifesto pledges? Does she have a little sympathy with the Leader of the Opposition, whose party is in such disarray over the matter?

Mrs. Beckett: I find it hard to have sympathy with the Opposition on this matter. They have created huge problems for themselves simply because they were not prepared to recognise that the hereditary principle has long since had its day.

Dr. Turner: It is 87 years since the Conservative party—or at least its predecessor—recognised that there was no case for retaining the hereditary principle. It is wriggling like mad to delay yet further. Can I have an assurance that the Bill will provide for an upper time limit, preferably not beyond the life of this Parliament, on any interim agreement under which hereditary peers continue to vote?

Mrs. Beckett: The Government are anxious to make progress on this legislation, as on our other manifesto commitments. That is why we hope to introduce the Bill in the near future. My hon. Friend asked me to speculate on its content and precise detail but I fear that I cannot do that before publication. No doubt he will have the chance to make his points in due course.

Mr. David Prior (North Norfolk): Does the President of the Council believe in a strong and independent second Chamber?

Mrs. Beckett: I certainly believe in an independent second Chamber with its proper role to carry out vis-a-vis this body. The notion that the House of Lords, whatever its strengths, is independent exists only in the fevered brains of the Conservatives.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): We have often asked for an assurance that all stages of the Bill will be taken on the Floor. We have not received it. This is a constitutional measure. Is there any reason why all stages

should not be taken on the Floor? Do the Government seriously believe that they can deal with stages 1 and 2 in the life of this Parliament?

Mrs. Beckett: I told the hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) on Thursday that we are happy to discuss through the usual channels whether the Bill should be discussed on the Floor.

The right hon. Gentleman asked me to speculate on whether it would be possible to complete the entire process in this Parliament. That requires me to speculate on the time that it will take to handle the legislation, on how it goes through another place, on the speed with which the royal commission completes its work—I hope that it will indeed be speedy—and, not least, on the date of the next general election. All I can tell him is that the Government intend to make as much progress as possible, as fast as possible.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Do the Government intend that the 91 hereditary peers should become life peers as part of the second stage so that some of the bovver boys in ermine will remain?

Mrs. Beckett: I am not sure whether I entirely follow my hon. Friend's question but let me say how I understand the position. People sometimes mean different things when they talk about stage 2. The transition House is the outcome of stage 1. If the agreement holds, it may be that some people will remain in that. What happens beyond stage 2 is a matter for the royal commission, a Joint Committee and, ultimately, this House.

Private Members' Bills

33. **Mr. Bob Russell** (Colchester): If she will provide more time during the Session to enable private Members' Bills to be proceeded with. [62162]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The Standing Orders now provide for private Members' Bills to be taken on 13 Fridays each Session. The Modernisation Committee may consider that issue and make other recommendations.

Mr. Russell: Does the right hon. Lady agree that hon. Members on both sides of the House are angered and disappointed by the lack of time provided for private Members' Bills—serious Bills which often have all-party support, but which do not have the opportunity to become law? Does she agree that the system should be simplified, so that more private Members' Bills can become law?

Mrs. Beckett: With respect, I do not agree that there is widespread anger at the amount of time available. However, I strongly agree that hon. Members on both sides of the House are angry about the way in which the procedures available to Back Benchers were handled in the last Session, and about what many hon. Members regard as entirely unjustified and deliberate obstruction of perfectly reasonable legislation by people who seem to think that they are here to play games.

Mr. John Marton (Glasgow, Cathcart): One way to ensure more time for private Members' Bills would be to give Wednesday morning sittings to that purpose, so that, instead of Adjournment debates, there could be Second Readings and further proceedings on private Members' Bills on Wednesday mornings. That would allow all hon. Members to play an active part in proceedings on such Bills, which often is not the case when the Bills are considered on Fridays.

Mrs. Beckett: All I can say is that there is always a question of what should be the balance between time for private Members' Bills and time for other business of the House, including scrutiny. The balance is a delicate one. In the last Parliament an average of about 17 private Members' Bills were passed in each Session—a not insignificant amount of legislation. However, if we are not able to deliver that amount, people ask questions about our existing procedures.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Does not the right hon. Lady agree that the long-established private Members' Bill procedure—working admirably as it does—provides protection for the public from a plethora of private Members' Bills, which are often promoted by narrow single-interest groups?

Mrs. Beckett: I accept that the right hon. Gentleman has a valid point: there are those who are concerned about the impact of a great mass of legislation. However, many people outside the House and many hon. Members on both sides within the House, do not believe that the protection of the public was secured by the way in which the right hon. Gentleman and one of his hon. Friends objected to almost every private Members' Bill that was introduced, including the Fireworks Bill, which was on the brink of passing into law. Their actions then did not protect the public or enhance public safety and many hon. Members regard what they did as a frivolous misuse of our procedures.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Does the right hon. Lady accept that, now that there are so many non-sitting Fridays, it is nonsense to pretend that those few Fridays on which the House sits are not proper parliamentary days? Does she also accept that Wednesday morning would not be a good time to take private Members' Bills, not least because many hon. Members value their present format?

Mrs. Beckett: I accept that many hon. Members value the present format of Wednesday mornings. However, if right hon. and hon. Members continue, on what appear to be frivolous grounds, to oppose private Members' Bills that command wide support in the House, that will lead to all sorts of questions being raised, which could impede the smooth working of the House. I hope that that will be borne in mind.

Millennium Compliance

34. **Mr. Andrew Miller** (Ellesmere Port and Neston): What progress is being made in preparation for the millennium bug in *(a)* Government Departments and *(b)* the wider public sector. [62163]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): The results of the latest review, which I announced in the House on 2 December, show that central Government continue to make steady progress in tackling the millennium bug, particularly in respect of business-critical systems. Three quarters of Departments and agencies have now completed 50 per cent. or more of the necessary correction work on such critical information technology systems, which is an increase from a figure of half of Departments and agencies in the previous quarter. Two fifths have completed 90 per cent. or more of the work, which is double the number from the previous quarter.

The returns also show that, on the whole, satisfactory progress is being made across the wider public sector. Although there is some concern that a number of individual organisations still lag behind, the Government are actively pursuing progress in those instances.

Mr. Miller: I thank my right hon. Friend for that frank and detailed response and for the publication of the last quarterly report. Does she agree that press speculation about people hoarding food, for example, in readiness for the millennium is ill founded? Perhaps the only thing that people should hoard is champagne, as it might be legitimately in short supply. Will my right hon. Friend join me in condemning those who promote such scare stories, including Opposition Members?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, but I will not be drawn into commenting on his suggestion about stockpiling champagne. I agree that it is unfortunate that there are those—including some Opposition Members—who are handling this matter frivolously and have no regard for providing sound advice to the public. My hon. Friend gave a very good example of that approach. Action 2000 was asked to comment on a report from the United States Red Cross, which was turned into an entirely unjustified scare story in this country.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): If the right hon. Lady thinks that Opposition Members are acting frivolously, perhaps she should consider whether Government Members are acting complacently. Is she aware of recent press stories that suggest that a significant proportion of Ministry of Defence systems will fail the test when the millennium bug comes into operation? Will she contrast those reports with complacent statement after complacent statement made in this House in past months about MOD systems? How many more Government Department estimates will be shown to be grossly over-optimistic in that way?

Mrs. Beckett: There is no complacency on the Government side, as we have made plain repeatedly—although we can afford to be slightly complacent about the fact that we are publishing this information on a more sustained and thorough basis than any other Government.

I thought that the hon. Gentleman had been around long enough, both in this House and outside it, to know better than to base his views on recent press stories. The Ministry of Defence continues to work on the very important systems that it supervises. It has made plain that all RAF aircraft will be compliant by January next—next month—and it is planned that all Royal Navy ships and Army mission critical systems will be compliant by the summer. No one is complacent: everyone is anxious to see as much work completed as possible. Unfortunately, openness does not always lead to people reflecting accurately the reports in the public domain.

Human Rights Committee

35. **Fiona Mactaggart** (Slough): What progress the Government have made in establishing a Committee of both Houses on human rights. [62164]

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): My hon. Friend will probably be aware that the Government have announced that, from the start of the Session, a statement of compatibility with the European convention on human rights will be made in relation to each Government Bill. In addition, I am pleased to announce today that both Houses will be asked to appoint a Joint Committee on human rights. It is intended to set up that Committee before the Human Rights Act 1998 comes fully into force so that it will have time to prepare its work.

Fiona Mactaggart: I welcome my right hon. Friend's answer regarding the formation of a Joint Committee of both Houses. Will she tell us something about the Committee's proposed terms of reference?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who I know has taken a great and sustained interest in these matters. We envisage that the Joint Committee's terms of reference will include the conduct of inquiries into general human rights issues in the United Kingdom, the scrutiny of remedial orders, the examination of draft legislation where there is doubt about compatibility with the ECHR, and the issue of whether there is a need for a human rights commission to monitor the operation of the Human Rights Act.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Does the right hon. Lady realise that both sides of the House will welcome that announcement? Will the Joint Committee have any purview in the field of foreign affairs as well as Britain's human rights policy? Will the annual report on human rights, which is always welcome—whatever criticisms we may make of its contents—be discussed in this House in future?

Mrs. Beckett: It is not intended that the Joint Committee will have a role in commenting on the handling of human rights overseas. It is specifically geared to scrutiny within the United Kingdom. As for debating such matters in the context of various reports, the hon. Gentleman is sufficiently assiduous in attending business questions to recognise that I am not in a position to give him an assurance on that point.

European Council (Vienna)

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): With permission, Madam Speaker, I will make a statement about the meeting of the European Council on 11 and 12 December which I attended in Vienna along with my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin). The Council conclusions have been placed in the Library.

The Council concentrated on employment and economic issues, Agenda 2000, enlargement, the future development of Europe and a number of foreign policy questions.

At Vienna—the last Council before the introduction of the euro by 11 member states—we confirmed and strengthened the strategy on economic reform and employment agreed at Amsterdam and Luxembourg last year and reinforced at Cardiff earlier this year. Macro-economic stability provides the essential basis for long-term growth. Supply-side reform must go hand in hand with that.

Member states have now submitted national progress reports on the reform of product and capital markets. Those will be subject to rigorous peer review in the first part of next year.

There will be a parallel review of national employment action plans, the first set of which were submitted during the UK presidency. At Vienna, we agreed revised employment guidelines on which next year's national action plans will be based. The new guidelines fully reflect British priorities. They place particular emphasis on tackling long-term unemployment; promoting equal opportunities; making a reality of lifelong learning; exploiting fully the potential of the service sector; creating the right climate for entrepreneurship; and reviewing tax and benefit systems to provide incentives for the unemployed to take up work or training. They promote social inclusion and examine regulations to ensure that they reduce barriers to employment. That work will be carried forward under the German presidency to produce an employment pact within the framework of a wider process aimed at employment, growth, stability and economic reform.

Jobs remain Europe's top priority. The strategy developed over the last 18 months is beginning to bear fruit, with more than 1 million new jobs created in the EU in the past year, including more than 250,000 in the UK, and the overall rate of EU unemployment falling below 10 per cent. for the first time since 1992. However, member states need to step up their efforts to implement real reforms in their labour markets, learning from one another. It was noteworthy that at Vienna representatives of small business people were included for the first time in the dialogue between Heads of Government, employers and unions.

Also in the economic field, we agreed new measures to complete the internal market, not least in financial services; to improve innovation; to increase the availability of risk capital; and to strengthen investment in infrastructure. We agreed on the gravity of the challenge posed by the millennium bug and the particular need to protect national and international infrastructure.

We also discussed the desirability of better economic policy co-ordination. A small part of that discussion concerned tax policy. The Council agreed that co-operation in that area is not aimed at achieving uniform tax rates or preventing fair tax competition; rather its aim is to reduce harmful distortions in the single market, prevent excessive losses of tax revenue and encourage employment-friendly tax structures. Work will continue on long-standing proposals on energy taxation and on taxation of savings, with a view to reaching agreement by next December. The UK Government will ensure that British interests—including those of the City of London—are fully protected and promoted in those discussions.

On a separate tax matter, I and others called for a review of the 1991 decision to end duty-free sales in Europe from next year, not least since the proposed successor arrangements risked ridicule. The Council asked the Commission and Finance Ministers to examine by next March possible means of addressing the problem, including a limited extension of the transition arrangements. Unanimity is required to secure such a change, but a door that seemed firmly closed is now at least half open.

The Council endorsed the Finance Ministers' report on external representation of the euro area. The UK's essential interests are protected—our membership of the G7 and other international forums will continue as before. We also confirmed an agenda for reform of the international monetary and financial system very much in line with the ideas for which my right hon Friend the Chancellor and I have been arguing: more transparency in international and national financial markets, better co-operation between the International Monetary Fund and other actors, and strengthened prudential and regulatory standards.

Much of the discussion in Vienna was about Agenda 2000. This is a wide-ranging and important negotiation embracing the reform of the common agricultural policy to help the consumer, to create a more efficient and competitive agriculture sector and to reduce the burden to the taxpayer; and reforms to the structural and cohesion funds to ensure that they are fair and affordable, including after enlargement. On future financing, the UK is among a large group of member states arguing for stabilisation of expenditure at current levels by 2006. Vienna confirmed the political objective of reaching overall agreement at a special meeting of the European Council on 24 and 25 March.

As for the British budget rebate, I repeat what I said in Vienna. The rebate is still fully justified and will remain. Even with it, the UK is the fifth largest net contributor in per capita terms, while we are ninth or 10th in terms of gross national product. We still pay far more than countries such as France, for example, with the equivalent population and slightly higher national income.

On enlargement, the European Council welcomed the fact that the first practical results have been reached in negotiations with Cyprus, Hungary, Poland, Estonia, the Czech Republic and Slovenia. It also welcomed progress made by Romania, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania and Bulgaria. It welcomed the reactivation of Malta's application, and recognised the importance of implementing the European Union's strategy to prepare Turkey for membership. Work in all these areas will intensify next year.

During the UK presidency, my right hon Friend the Deputy Prime Minister led work in the European Union on integrating environmental policy into other community policies. The Austrian presidency carried forward this work in transport, energy and agriculture. At Vienna, we agreed that it should be developed further into the spheres of international development, the internal market and industry.

At Cardiff, I launched a debate on the future development of the European Union which was carried forward at the informal summit in Pörtschach in October. We agreed in Vienna further steps to make a reality of subsidiarity and improve the effectiveness of EU institutions. We will issue a millennium declaration setting out the Union's priorities for the period ahead at the end of next year, to coincide with a new Commission taking office.

At Pörtschach, I urged the strengthening of the EU's foreign policy, not least by backing it with a credible capability for military action in regional crises where the US or NATO as a whole does not wish to be engaged. The joint declaration agreed with the French at St. Malo on 4 December gave us a sound basis on which to build this initiative. It was widely welcomed by partners at Vienna. We agreed that work should be taken forward under the German presidency. There is, of course, no question of undermining NATO in any way. Strengthening European defence capability will, I believe, strengthen NATO.

On current foreign policy issues, we underlined the urgency of bringing the parties in Kosovo to a political agreement and the importance of the European Union continuing its political and economic support for the middle east peace process. We repeated our readiness to help Russia overcome its present severe difficulties, and agreed that Russia should be the subject of one of the first common foreign and security policy common strategies when the Amsterdam treaty enters into force.

The Vienna Council also made useful progress on the economic and employment points, and above all laid a solid foundation for the difficult Agenda 2000 negotiations in the next three months. Britain's interests were safeguarded and promoted without difficulty. We defended our positions in a constructive way, just as others defended theirs.

In the days before Vienna, we issued joint statements with Spain on structural reform, with Sweden on social policy, with France on defence and with Germany on tax. All of those were welcomed in the discussion and reflected in the conclusions. At Vienna itself, we helped shape the debate on economic and employment issues, on Agenda 2000, on enlargement and on other issues, in sensible directions fully consistent with our own national interests.

This Government, I believe, have transformed Britain's relations with the rest of the European Union since they took office. It is in the fundamental interests of this country that we remain fully engaged in the debate on the development of the European Union. On the Government Benches, we have the confidence in our arguments, and in our ability to build support for them, to believe that we can win the debates in Europe in favour of economic reform and an open and decentralised Europe.

Those who would end up by taking us out of Europe, or so far to its margins as to eclipse any serious influence in Europe, would profoundly damage this country. This Government will not be swayed from their positive and constructive European policy because I have no doubt at all that this is the right course for Britain's future.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): On behalf of the Opposition, may I support some of the conclusions reached at Vienna, including the strong commitment to the universal declaration of human rights, statements on the importance of the middle east peace process, work on Kosovo and the desire to assist Russia, Ukraine and the western Balkans? May I welcome the Government's efforts to retain duty free? Does the Prime Minister agree that none of the steps set out in the original agreement is in place, so there is an overwhelming case for duty free to continue? Will he tell the Secretary of State for Health that, as he seems to have a different policy from the rest of the Government at the moment?

Is not the Prime Minister's habit of saying one thing to one audience in one place and another to an audience in another place finally catching up with him? He referred to the British rebate. Will he confirm that, while he was telling the British media that the rebate was not up for negotiation, he was busily telling the Austrian media that there would be wide-ranging negotiations in which the rebate would come up for discussion? If he did say that, did he mean it? If he did not mean it, why did he say it? If he did mean it, why not say the same thing in Britain? Will he cease his habit of saying one thing at home and something completely different abroad? Would not that be a much more effective way in which to ensure that his thoughts are reported accurately than simply whining about the British press?

Nothing causes the Prime Minister to complain louder than the British public being told about plans for tax harmonisation. He made great play of the fact that the communiqué rules out the possibility of "uniform tax rates". Apparently, that phrase was inserted at the Government's insistence. Why did we insist on that, when uniform tax rates are not the threat? Why did not the Prime Minister insist instead on an end to tax harmonisation? Why did he not call for the removal of references to "a tax policy package", "reinforced tax policy co-operation", or the far-reaching Commission "study on company taxation"? Why does not he guarantee to veto moves on the withholding tax or the so-called exchange of information—both and either of which would hit the City hard? Would not arguing against those real threats have demonstrated more backbone than arguing against imaginary threats?

Why did the French and Germans point out that the wording of the communiqué did not rule out harmonisation of specific taxes? Is that what the Prime Minister agreed? Why did the Luxembourg Economic Minister report:

"Everybody said there would be more tax harmonisation"?

How on earth did he get that impression? Presumably, the Prime Minister was there standing up for Britain's interests. If so, why did nobody notice? Why did not the Luxembourg Economics Minister notice? If the Prime Minister was prepared to say in Vienna that there would be more tax harmonisation, why will he not say that in Britain? Why will he not tell this House and the British public what he tells other Heads of Government?

[Mr. William Hague]

What are the Prime Minister's guiding principles on Europe? What has happened to his defence policy? The Labour party manifesto states:

"Our security will continue to be based on Nato",

and contains a commitment to the Western European Union, which is clearly under threat. Following the Amsterdam summit, the Prime Minister described proposals along precisely the lines now being suggested as,

"an ill-judged Franco-German transplant operation".

Why has he changed his mind so dramatically? Do not the proposals in fact endanger our commitment to NATO?

The Prime Minister says that he wants to be fully engaged in Europe, but would it not be more accurate to say that, whatever the circumstances, he will go with the flow? Earlier this year, the Government promised to make EU enlargement a priority. Why is the Prime Minister now content for the timetable for the entry of countries such as Poland and Hungary to slip further? Will he confirm that they may not be able to join the European Union until 2005 or later—15 years after they threw off communism and first expressed an interest in joining?

In their original Foreign Office mission statement, the Government promised to work for a Europe of independent nation states. How does that promise fit with this agreement at Vienna—an agreement that can be summarised in the first sentence of the communiqué:

"European integration has gained new momentum"?

The Prime Minister obviously agrees that that is a true statement of the facts, as he signed up to the communiqué. What has happened to the Foreign Secretary's assertion in August that

"Maastricht was the high-water mark of European integration"?

"European integration has gained new momentum"

is the first phrase of the communiqué that the Prime Minister has signed—and it has done so while he has been Prime Minister, saying one thing in one place and something else in another.

So let us have some straight answers. Is that greater integration something that the Prime Minister welcomes? If it is, why does he not say so, instead of running around Europe giving more false impressions than Rory Bremner? If that is not something that he welcomes, why does he not do something about it? And if he does not know whether it is something that he welcomes, he does not deserve to be Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: First, let me deal with some of the issues of fact. The right hon. Gentleman took me to task on duty free. Might I remind him that the people that agreed to abolish duty free were the previous Conservative Government, in 1991? Of course, the difficulty that we have had in the duty free argument is that unanimity is required to change the plans precisely because of the agreement that the Conservative Government made. As for the right hon. Gentleman's claim that I said one thing to the Austrian newspapers and another to the British press, that is apparently based on an interview that I gave to an Austrian newspaper, a transcript of which we provided to the British press; so I hardly think that that is consistent with saying a different thing to them.

Finally on the points of detail, the right hon. Gentleman said that we had agreed to shove the enlargement timetable back. We agreed no such thing. He said that our agreement on defence somehow undermined NATO. I suggest that he reads the recent words of Madeleine Albright, who has agreed that it is very sensible that Europe, in circumstances where the US does not want to become engaged, is able to do more of the cleaning up of problems in its own back yard. Only the Conservative party could see that as a negative move.

As for the right hon. Gentleman's strictures on tax, on unfair tax competition, he asks why I did not come out against the whole notion of greater tax co-operation. It could have been for the following reasons. First, before the general election, it was agreed by the previous Government that they endorsed

"the concern expressed . . . about the effects of special tax arrangements . . . and unfair competition, and"

believed

"that consideration is urgently needed of possible remedies to this problem".

They then agreed, at the Dublin summit in 1996, to set up the taxation policy group, and the first meeting of the group took place under the previous Conservative Government. I feel that that would have somewhat inhibited me in saying that it was all wrong. Of course, the then Government were quite right in doing that, because some of the tax practices across Europe are harmful to this country, so it is perfectly sensible to have a discussion about them. I may say that the code of conduct on tax says in terms, right at the beginning, that it is a political commitment, not a legal one.

As for tax harmonisation, yes, we did agree words that made it very clear that uniform tax rates were ruled out, and made it very clear that no one was opposed to proper and fair tax competition. In the House of Commons on 9 December, I read the right hon. Gentleman a list of all those other Heads of Government who had made the same thing clear on behalf of their Governments—the French Prime Minister, the Spanish Prime Minister, the Irish Deputy Prime Minister and the Italian Finance Minister. I also read a quote from the Euro CBI, expressing a similar view.

I can add to that list now. The Austrian Prime Minister said:

"We are not against competition, and I am not against tax competition."

Let us see what the Greek Prime Minister said.

"Any effort to create a common tax policy would be pointless."

I could quote to the right hon. Gentleman virtually any newspaper anywhere in Europe, ruling out tax harmonisation in the terms that he has described it.

There is only one discordant note on tax harmonisation—the person who said this:

"We always accepted there was a case for minimal tax harmonisation . . . It was perfectly well known there was a case for minimal tax harmonisation for the development of the single market."—[*Official Report*, 9 December 1998; Vol. 322, c. 382.]

Who was that? The shadow Chancellor last week. What did the Leader of the Opposition say this morning? He described the communiqué as the greatest threat to British independence for decades. More important than the Maastricht treaty, or the Single European Act?

That statement shows how extreme the Conservative party has become. If the Conservative party was in power today, we would not have an ally anywhere. We would have no influence, no authority and no ability to get our own way—nothing. The Leader of the Opposition says that he wants to build alliances in Europe: for heaven's sake, he cannot even build alliances in his own party.

I think it was the previous Prime Minister who said that the small group of Euro-sceptics was trying to give his leadership the run-around. He said that that group needed the men in white coats to come to rescue him. Under the present leader of the Conservative party, the lunatics have taken over the asylum. That is the position into which the right hon. Gentleman has put his party. He is not in charge of it. He is not running his party. The policy of the right hon. Gentleman's party is determined by the headbangers with whom he has surrounded himself in his shadow Cabinet. That is the truth, and the right hon. Gentleman is driven before them.

However extreme the right hon. Gentleman's position and that of his party, the country's national interest lies in being part of Europe. That is the way to win in Europe and that is what this Government shall do.

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): My right hon. Friend is justified in saying that the Opposition have form on key matters such as taxation and duty free and, therefore, are not credible in what they are now saying in their isolationist stance. However, will my right hon. Friend say a little more about the future, and particularly about subsidiarity? He will recall that he initiated the debate on the future of the European Union in Cardiff. That was followed through at the special summit in October in Austria. Can my right hon. Friend say what specifically was decided at Vienna on subsidiarity?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I can. My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the importance of subsidiarity. We agreed at Vienna on specific measures to imbed subsidiarity more firmly in the way in which the European Union works. In particular, we have agreed that the subsidiarity protocol—the Amsterdam treaty—should be applied immediately. We intend to examine existing laws when significant new legislation is proposed to ascertain whether they should be modified or repealed. That agenda on subsidiarity is making progress, but we must not let up on it at all. We must be eternally vigilant in pushing this agenda forward. I believe that most people in Europe can see that there are certain areas in which Europe should work more closely together and integrate more closely. There are other areas where it is important that we push power downwards.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North–East Fife): May I welcome the Prime Minister's statement, and particularly those parts of it which deal with the common foreign and security policy and the need for better defence co-ordination in Europe? May I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on his apparent recent conversion to the view that Government policy on Europe will be determined by what is best for Britain, not by what is least offensive to certain newspaper proprietors? Does he accept that there is no point in attempting to placate the implacable?

So long as the reasons for the rebate remain, so too must the rebate. Does the right hon. Gentleman accept also that if there is wholesale reform of the common agricultural policy resulting in a substantial reduction in the European Union budget, inevitably different considerations would apply?

Is it not now abundantly clear that the United Kingdom will best maximise its influence in Europe with membership of the single European currency? Why today does the right hon. Gentleman not declare the intention in principle to join and to prepare for a referendum to obtain the British people's endorsement?

The Prime Minister: The answer to the hon. and learned Gentleman's final point is: precisely because I believe the British national economic interest should determine our membership. For the reasons that we have given, we do not believe that that is satisfied by entry into the single currency. We have set out the very test that would be applied to a decision whether to join the single currency.

I welcome some of the hon. and learned Gentleman's other remarks, but I pick him up on the common agricultural policy and the rebate. On any basis of CAP reform now being proposed, the British rebate will remain justified. I agree that we need fundamental reform of the CAP, and we are certainly prepared to examine mechanisms such as co-financing to try to get that reform through. On any basis, Britain will still be a big net contributor to the EU. We are at present the second largest cash contributor after Germany.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the best way to gain concessions in Europe, such as those on duty free or the beef ban, is not by the tantrums and boycotts in which the Conservatives indulged when they were in government, but by co-operation and winning friends? Will he also confirm that Britain's national interest, of which he and the Government are guardians, is best served by sane and sensible discussion with our European partners? In expounding and assessing Government policy, will my right hon. Friend compare the hostility of the Leader of the Opposition to democracies in Europe with his support for a south American dictator accused of murder and torture?

The Prime Minister: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend that the best way to get results in Europe is to build alliances and to be constructive. All other countries in Europe find no difficulty in standing up for their national interests and still being constructive about Europe. For the life of me, I cannot see why we are incapable of doing the same in our country. If there are issues, such as the beef ban or the rebate, on which we have to remain firm, we do so. We argue our case on the basis of reason. That is the best way to get results. As we showed with the lifting of the beef ban, when we approach issues in that way, people respond.

[The Prime Minister]

What is the point of being in Europe if we always treat the rest of Europe as something that is done to Britain rather than something from which we can get an advantage? That is the worst thing that we can do.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): What exactly is meant by the words in the Vienna communiqué about closer British association with European defence and security policy? Bearing in mind the momentum that apparently innocuous European suggestions often develop on their own, can the Prime Minister give us an absolute guarantee that we shall not in due course be asked to put a European or a German finger on the British nuclear trigger?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I certainly can say that. No one is even suggesting such a thing. There are situations in which closer co-operation between European countries makes sense. We are already setting up an individual to be Mr. or Ms CFSP, and a deputy. A whole apparatus already exists to develop closer common foreign and security policy links. The most intelligent thing for this country to do is not to pretend that that debate is not happening, but to get in there and shape it so that we act in a way that is consistent with NATO and do not allow the agenda to be set by those—I do not think that there are many—who want to undermine NATO. That is the right way to get results for this country.

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): Does not the Vienna summit show that it is not a question of Britain standing alone, but of discussions and agreements that are of mutual benefit to the United Kingdom and to the European Union? Let us forget for a moment about the Conservative party and consider the Euro-sceptic press. Is it not time that they stopped trying to whip up anti-European hysteria and started reporting the facts about European affairs?

The Prime Minister: People are entitled to their views on Europe, but it is best that we should judge everything according to the facts as much as we can. From a reading of the press in the rest of Europe on the Vienna summit and the British contribution, if there are criticisms of the summit they are not that it was the greatest step towards integration for decades, but that not as much was decided there as some would have liked, although I personally think that it was a successful summit. But the important fact is that the British contribution was welcomed. That is in our country's interests. We can satisfy the British national interest and be constructive in Europe because they are one and the same thing.

Mr. Ian Taylor (Esher and Walton): Does the Prime Minister accept that after the publicity of the past few weeks, he has to do even more to persuade the British public and one or two people closer to home that positive engagement in the European Union is in the British national interest? When making that case, will he explain that reforms, such as that of the common agricultural policy, and enlargement will probably cost more money? Will he also explain that of course there needs to be a discussion about taxation in a single market as well as a single monetary zone? Those matters are on the agenda. When there are differences of opinion, the British view must be put across clearly. That view would be more emphatic if there was a clearer statement from the Prime Minister about the timetable towards euro entry and the fact that his economic policy is designed to secure the prospect of that entry.

The Prime Minister: I have set out our position on the euro. On the other points that the hon. Gentleman raised, it is important not to disengage from the argument on tax competition or unfair tax competition in the European Union because there is much to be gained by co-operating on these issues and much to be lost if we disengage. I hope that we have tried to explain that in the context of the Vienna summit. It would help—not to intrude too much on other disagreements—if people such as the hon. Gentleman were given a bit more support from their Front Benchers, as having a legitimate view about Europe in the Conservative party.

Mr. Denzil Davies (Llanelli): I believe that my right hon. Friend mentioned that there is to be a Commission study into the taxation of savings. Will it involve looking at the different ways that income tax is imposed on savings, and the different rates of income tax on savings, in the different countries?

The Prime Minister: The issue of savings tax has been raised specifically by countries that are worried about what they consider to be unfair tax advantages given in certain European countries. The withholding tax idea is something about which we have difficulties, because of the Eurobond market in the City of London. We have other difficulties with it, too. We are not the only country with problems there, and we have no intention of agreeing to anything that would sacrifice essential British interests.

Sir Teddy Taylor (Rochford and Southend, East): Having listened to optimistic and positive statements from European Council meetings for 23 years, one tends to look at the small print, where proper guidance is given. What exactly does the Prime Minister mean by saying that the Government, along with the others, are committed to long-standing proposals on energy taxation and the taxing of savings, with a view to reaching agreement by December of next year? Will he say clearly and precisely what ideas he and the others have for taxing energy, to be agreed by next December? What proposals does he have in mind for taxing savings by next December—and is that the basis for the reported flight of a great deal of money from Britain, and, indeed, from Jersey and Guernsey, to Switzerland over the past few days?

The Prime Minister: In relation to energy, that work has been going on for a long time, through the Deputy Prime Minister and others. Domestic energy is specifically excluded from that, but we are all trying to make sure that we meet our obligations under the agreement concluded, for example, at the Kyoto climate conference which has just taken place.

As I have already said, as a country, we have great difficulties with doing anything in respect of the savings tax. The question is, what do we do when we are faced with proposals—

Sir Teddy Taylor: You agreed to it.

The Prime Minister: We are not saying that we agree with the proposals on savings taxes. The document and the communiqué actually say that there is an attempt to conclude an agreement by Helsinki next year. That does not mean that we will agree to it. With the greatest respect to the hon. Gentleman, if we disengage from that debate, all it would mean is that the debate would happen without a British voice. There is nothing that is being proposed there that we need fear in the least, which is why we will carry on arguing the British case constructively. If we do that, we are more likely to win.

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton–under–Lyne): My right hon. Friend voiced his criticism of th Euro-sceptic press, quite justifiably. Will he explain more fully to our country the advantages of joining the euro and—even more important—the disadvantages of not joining?

The Prime Minister: I have nothing to add to the statements that the Chancellor of the Exchequer and I have already made on that issue, but people are perfectly entitled to their views, for or against. It is important that the debate takes place on the basis of facts. The truth is that the debate about tax harmonisation for the past two or three weeks has had, in certain quarters, precious little at all to do with facts.

Mr. John Gummer (Suffolk, Coastal): Does the Prime Minister accept that those of us who are in favour of as much engagement in Europe as is suitable for the United Kingdom are also concerned about his statement about Agenda 2000? After all, he managed to speak about the reform of the common agricultural policy without mentioning the environment once.

The one area where the environment is most important is making sure that we reform the CAP in a way that pays farmers for looking after the land, instead of producing too much and dumping it on third-world countries. The Prime Minister need not look at his notes, because he did not mention the environment then, but later, in respect of other things. None of those other things matter anything like as much as putting over our point of view on the environment in the agricultural debate.

The Prime Minister: I certainly agree that it is extremely important to take the environment into account in common agricultural policy reform. We are ahead of the other countries in arguing for reform—the more fundamental it is, the better. As I think I pointed out in my statement, our arguments on the environment have been strengthened by the work of the Deputy Prime Minister, who has insisted that the environment be taken into account across a range of issues where currently it is not.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): The House may have overlooked the earlier comments of my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that 1 million new jobs have been created in the European Union in the past year and that the unemployment rate has fallen to less than 10 per cent. Does not that suggest that jobs can be created by following a vigorous micro-economic policy within the framework of low inflation, low interest rates and a fixed element to the currency? My right hon. Friend mentioned influence and authority; does he recall the words of a former Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, who said:

"To jaw-jaw is better than to war-war"?

Is not persuasive diplomacy better than the clanging cymbals of the Conservative party?

The Prime Minister: If we do not try to persuade people, we are not listened to at all. The Leader of the Opposition said this morning that he wanted to build alliances with other centre-right parties in Europe, but I do not know who would build an alliance with him. I do not think that the Belgian Prime Minister or the Spanish Prime Minister would; to be honest, I do not think that any of them would.

May I correct something that the right hon. Member for Suffolk, Coastal (Mr. Gummer) said? I said in my statement—I apologise for not finding this when I replied to his question—that, under the United Kingdom presidency, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister led work in the European Union on integrating environmental policy into other community policies and that the Austrian presidency carried forward that work in transport, energy and agriculture.

Sir David Madel (South–West Bedfordshire): The German Government are paying a huge bill towards the modernisation of east Germany and they are now insisting on paying less towards the European Union budget. If Germany, as the biggest contributor, pays less, there will be consequences for the time scale of enlargement. What is the Government's attitude to Chancellor Schröder's insistence that Germany should pay less?

The Prime Minister: I understand why the hon. Gentleman says that. The answer is stabilisation of the finances and then reform of expenditure. The best thing that we can do to put our national case forward most sensibly is to argue for limits on expenditure, about which the Germans and others are naturally concerned. That is the way forward; it is, in fact, the central argument in European Union financing. If we agreed stabilisation and fundamental reform of the CAP, that would go a long way towards meeting German concerns.

Mr. Bill Rammell (Harlow): Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirm that the decisions made on taxation at the summit were totally at odds with what, in the run-up to the summit, the Euro-sceptic press led us to believe would happen? Is it not a cause for concern that our people are so ill informed by our national newspapers on this issue? Is it not time for the Government to go on the offensive to rebut the distortions, half-truths and downright untruths of the Euro-sceptics? During 18 years in

[Mr. Bill Rammell]

opposition, the Labour party learned to put straight the record straight away when our political opponents misled—that is more important on Europe than on many other issues.

The Prime Minister: I think that many members of the public understand exactly what is going on. They want us to present the facts calmly, which is what we try to do—it is the best antidote to scare stories of any kind.

Sir Michael Spicer (West Worcestershire): Did not the Prime Minister miss the real point on tax in his statement? The single currency is bound to lead to a massive increase in the tax burden, as resources have to be shifted from the north of Europe to the otherwise impoverished south.

The Prime Minister: I do not agree. There is no reason why the single currency should mean a higher tax burden in Europe. The northern countries in particular want their tax burdens reduced, which is one reason why it was so false to say that the rest of Europe wanted tax harmonisation to bump up taxes all over Europe. Many countries are trying to reduce their tax burdens and we should be working with them to achieve that.

Mr. Robin Corbett (Birmingham, Erdington): I welcome my right hon. Friend's assurance that the talks on the admission of Cyprus to the European Union are proceeding and are on track. What progress has been achieved between the Commission and Turkey on making it clearer to the Turkish authorities what they have to do, and over what time scale, to enhance their prospects of entry?

The Prime Minister: In respect of Cyprus, we made it clear that the accession negotiations should continue. Obviously, it would help the negotiations to proceed faster and better if we got a resolution of the essential problem of Cyprus. On Turkey, we specifically and in terms endorsed the European strategy vis-a-vis Turkey which was agreed at the Cardiff summit, and we will continue to pursue that. As I have made clear on many occasions, we want relations between the EU and Turkey to be developed and strengthened. I believe that they can be strengthened.

Mr. Cynog Dafis (Ceredigion): Does the Prime Minister accept that in a single market with a single currency, there will be a trend to strengthen advantaged regions and to weaken disadvantaged regions unless there are strong mechanisms for financial transfers—which, in Europe, means structural funds? Does the Prime Minister understand that, as we move into a single currency, his opposition to the strengthening of structural funds is diametrically opposed to the interests of the economies of Wales, Scotland and some of the English regions—especially when that is compounded by the Government's support for the Fontainebleau agreement, which provides a disincentive to using European structural funds? If he cares about Wales and Scotland, will he reconsider his position on that matter?

The Prime Minister: We have done our very best to secure the position of Wales in particular during the negotiations. It was as a result of the Government's intervention during the United Kingdom presidency that we underpinned objective 2 financing. We have managed to secure significant advances in relation to objective 1 funding, precisely because of the way in which we have approached the negotiations. Within the context of enlargement, we are doing as well as we possibly can.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston): Does the Prime Minister agree with the former Chancellor who said yesterday that there is no question of majority voting on matters of tax, either now or in the future?

The Prime Minister: Yes, I agree. That point has been made, to my certain knowledge, by at least three or four Heads of Government over the weekend. That matter is simply not on the agenda, and most people understand why—because it is right that Parliaments set national taxes in the way that they wish.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): I am sure that the House welcomes the initiative instigated by the Irish Government to carry out a review of the effects of the abolition of duty free trade before that is done. It is a pity that the Prime Minister has sought to claim credit for that. The review should have been carried out as a prerequisite before any implementation of the 1991 agreement. The Prime Minister made his view clear in three parliamentary answers in May, and his Government did nothing about the matter during the entire United Kingdom presidency of the EU. Will he flesh out his triumph a little, and indicate who will carry out the review, how long it will take, whether it will report to the Commission or the Council of Ministers and what weight it will be given?

The Prime Minister: To be honest, it really does not matter who takes credit for the initiative, but we have worked closely with the Irish Government on this matter. The hon. Gentleman's interpretation would be regarded as a trifle bizarre by most of those who were at the Vienna summit. The only inhibition that we have about this matter is the fact that the Conservative Government agreed to the abolition—that is our problem. Not only did they agree to abolition, they agreed that the matter could not be reopened, except by unanimity. We have worked on the matter recently because, first, it has become clear that the successor regime will not work properly—that is the reason for the review—and secondly, we have been able to build the type of alliances that he and the rest of his party would not wish us to have with anyone in Europe.

The review will be conducted by the Commission and the Finance Ministers, and we will make our views known very clearly indeed. For the first time, we have managed to get the door a little bit open, thanks to this Government and no thanks to the previous Government.

Mr. Gwyn Prosser (Dover): Is my right hon. Friend aware how heartened my constituents are that he has managed to prise open that door to duty free in Europe, which the Tories wanted to slam shut? May I remind him of the 20,000 jobs that duty free supports in Dover, in east Kent and throughout the United Kingdom? The Government's approach to duty free along with our more positive engagement in Europe shows that we are on line to look after our own interests while becoming more closely involved in European affairs.

The Prime Minister: That is absolutely right. I do not believe that we would ever have succeeded in getting

other countries behind us in trying to reopen the issue if we had not had a different attitude. There is a long way to go. The door is open, where it was previously shut. I do not pretend that all the difficulties are over with—they are not at all—but at least we have the chance to argue the case. I am quite sure that, as with the beef ban, we do better in the end by being constructive.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): What percentage of gross domestic product does the Prime Minister think should go to Europe? Does he understand that factors including the enlargement process, the costs of the common agricultural policy, high unemployment, the structural and cohesion funds, the intention to increase taxation to a level that is more satisfactory to Germany and pension liabilities are all bound to put more and more pressure on the budget? What should be the level of our European budget, and how will he be able to contain it while at the same time preventing tax harmonisation?

The Prime Minister: As the hon. Gentleman knows, there is a 1.27 per cent. ceiling. We will argue for stabilisation of expenditure. I simply do not know what he means by saying that the Germans want to set our tax rate.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): He did not say that.

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman did effectively say that. He was effectively saying that Germany wants to ensure that everyone's tax rates go up to its level. If we carry on conducting his type of argument in the way that he wants to conduct it, this country might as well leave Europe. That is what he wants. The tragedy for his party is the fact that his views now dominate the Conservative Front Bench. In a sense, he should be rejoicing: he was once a small minority in the Conservative party, and now he runs the party's policy. That is its tragedy.

Dr. Norman A. Godman (Greenock and Inverclyde): Despite my right hon. Friend's commendable commitment to enlargement, might I suggest that it is in fact a far distant prospect? We need to conclude the reform of the common agricultural policy, the budget and other institutional matters. Given those near intractable problems, have the applicant countries been told that they are engaged in a long, long game?

The Prime Minister: Yes, there will obviously be long negotiations, but we will conclude them as quickly as possible. It is worth restating why enlargement is important for the European Union: it allows us to bring in the former communist countries of eastern Europe, which will not only bring them greater security and prosperity for their future but be good for the whole of Europe. I was just reading what the previous Prime Minister said about enlargement. He was absolutely right when he said that it would require "imagination, flexibility and generosity." We will have to ensure that we bring those countries in as quickly as possible. It was under our presidency, at Cardiff, that we started the pre-accession process properly.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): Can the Prime Minister guarantee that the net contribution by the British taxpayer to the European Union budget will not increase, and is he prepared to be judged on that criterion?

The Prime Minister: We have made it clear that we will fight for the stabilisation of European Union expenditure. On any basis, even if we keep the rebate, British net contributions will be the second largest in the European Union. That is why we will carry on fighting for British national interests.

Dr. George Turner (North–West Norfolk): Before we go much further towards restoring duty free, will my right hon. Friend consult the Secretary of State for Health to see whether it is in British interest for duty free to continue for cigarettes and tobacco products coming into this country? If there is a case for tax co-operation in Europe, might not that mean that taxes should be raised in Europe to this country's levels on such products?

The Prime Minister: The reason for extending the existence of duty free is to establish a sensible successor regime. We do not have that at the moment. We are not arguing that we should reverse the 1991 decision: that would be impossible to achieve even if we sought it. However, there is a growing view that a successor regime is not properly in place and, to safeguard our interests and those of many people who work in companies connected with the trade, it is important to get an extension. We seek an extension, not an overall reversal of the decision.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): The Prime Minister said that the door is now half open on duty free, so by definition it must be still half closed. I understand that Denmark is one of the countries that are still against any extension of duty free. What measures are the Government pursuing to bring other countries on board? I welcome the fact that small businesses were represented at the Vienna summit for the first time at that level, and small firms in the vale of York will welcome it also. Does the Prime Minister agree that we need less, not more, employment policy and a more flexible social policy from Brussels?

The Prime Minister: On the latter point, the employment chapter that was agreed at the Amsterdam summit specifically focused on measures that Governments could take on training, skills and apprenticeships and direct measures to help the unemployed, rather than on regulation. We have tried to move the argument away from that and the best way to do so is to make the argument within the European Union.

I agree with the hon. Lady's point on duty free: the door is still half closed. That is an improvement, but I cannot mislead people by saying that the deal has been done. We have a chance to do it, and probably only two or three countries now stand in the way. We will make what attempts we can to persuade them, but we now have a large and impressive majority in favour of an extension.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): I can accept a lot—the euro, tax harmonisation and even

[Mr. Harry Barnes]

European armed forces—but only if we first tackle the most serious problem in the European Union, which is its massive democratic deficit. It is said that if the European Union applied for membership of itself, it would be refused on the grounds that it does not have democratic institutions. Is anything being done to change that situation?

The Prime Minister: I am not sure that I can completely satisfy my hon. Friend on that point. The dilemma is that most of us want to see as much democracy in the European Union as possible, but that it must be consistent with national Governments having a strong role to play. We have discussed the issue of tax and tax harmonisation and most people would wish to proceed cautiously on that issue. When we talk about the democratic deficit in the European Union, we should not forget that the Governments of the European Union are democratically elected. When they come together to negotiate, they do so on a democratic basis. Most people would be concerned if we took too much power away from national Governments in the negotiation of European issues.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): Why did not the Prime Minister raise—at least, he did not report that he raised—the issue of European Union subsidies for tobacco growing? Does he recall his words in the article he wrote for *The Times* today:

"if Europe proposes something foolish, I will work to stop it. If necessary, I will do it alone."?

Why has he had so little success? I am sure that the Secretary of State for Health regards it as foolish that British taxpayers' money should be devoted to the subsidy of tobacco growing. Is it because the Prime Minister finds stability sexy, or does he have a soft spot for tobacco sponsorship in Europe?

The Prime Minister: No, it is probably for the same reason that the Conservative Government did not get very far on the issue in 18 years. Some very big interests are at stake, and they push their case firmly. Let me repeat that the negotiations to reform financing in the European Union for the purposes of enlargement give us the best chance to try to make progress on tobacco and other issues. The big negotiation will take place on future financing, and that is where we can make much of the case for fundamental reform of the common agricultural policy. To the hon. Gentleman, I must say that we are better able to make that case if we engage in it constructively rather than being isolated and negative.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Order. We must now move on to the main business of the day.

Points of Order

4.25 pm

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I seek your guidance. During questions to the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the Minister for Arts said in response to one of my hon. Friends that, when the Government announced their culture strategy last weekend, they did not simply hold a press conference, but arranged for a written parliamentary answer to be given. I understand that no such answer has been provided. Have you had any notification from the Minister that he intends to come before the House to apologise for and to explain that misinformation?

Madam Speaker: I doubt whether it was misinformation. I have had no communication from any Minister at the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, but I shall read *Hansard* when it is printed.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will know that, on Wednesday, the House will debate the extremely important so-called modernisation—some may regard it as the destruction—of the procedures of the House. You will also know, better than most, that that debate will coincide with a very important event in the annual parliamentary calendar, namely the parliamentary carol service at St. Margaret's Church. Have you considered—if not, would you accept the suggestion—that given the importance of the debate and the importance of the event across the road, it would be appropriate to suspend the sitting of the House at that point? I am sure that you would agree that that would provide an opportunity not only for sober reflection, but to ponder the value of tradition.

Madam Speaker: It is not in my thinking to suspend sittings of the House at that period. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to pursue the matter, perhaps he would do so through the usual channels. I hope that a great many hon. Members will wish to speak on Wednesday, and I shall follow the debate with a great deal of interest.

Orders of the Day

Greater London Authority Bill

Order for Second Reading read.

Madam Speaker: I have selected the amendment in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. The instruction in the name of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) has not been selected, but its contents may be raised during the Second Reading debate.

4.28 pm

The Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. John Prescott): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Government were elected on a promise to modernise the way in which Britain is governed. We promised to make our politics more open, more accountable and more inclusive, and relevant to the 21st century. We are delivering on that promise. We have devolved power to Scotland and to Wales. We are putting in place new agencies to deliver real economic development in our regions. We have started on putting local government back in touch with the people whom it serves. Later in the Session, we shall at long last start to remove the hereditary principle from our system of governance.

The Bill before us is an integral part of that programme of reform. It is about modernising the government of the capital, and about giving power to the people of London, stripping away the shadowy committees, burgeoning bureaucracies and quangos created by our predecessor. London has world-beating financial and business services sectors, innovative and exciting arts, culture and entertainment industries, and a business climate that makes it the natural place for foreign investors. The capital has an ethnic diversity and tolerance that is the envy of other major cities, and a commitment to stamping out racism and promoting real equality. In short, it is a world-class city.

However, behind that success lie deep-rooted problems. As well as all the wealth, there is grinding poverty and social exclusion. Two thirds of the most deprived housing estates in England are in London.

Across the capital, London's creaking transport infrastructure bears witness to a decade or more of neglect. London's streets are increasingly congested, its air polluted. There is a gap between the experience of racially motivated crimes and their recording by the police. Those problems need to be tackled.

It is fundamentally wrong, and frankly inefficient, to provide no coherent form of government for a city of 7 million people. That is why we made a manifesto commitment to create a new mayor and assembly for London, directly elected by and accountable to the people of London. That is why, in every borough, people voted overwhelmingly in favour of our proposals. That is what this Bill delivers.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way at that point. Since this subject may come up again and again in the debate, may we get straight at this point the degree of support that the people of London gave the proposal? The right hon. Gentleman used the term "overwhelming". Will he confirm that one in three Londoners bothered to vote in the referendum and, of those, not even three quarters voted yes? Please will he withdraw the term "overwhelming", and ask his hon. Friends not to use it in the debate?

Mr. Prescott: Well, more than 30 per cent. of Londoners participated in the vote, and more than 70 per cent. of them agreed with our proposal. That appears to be a rather overwhelming majority in favour of the proposal. The previous Government survived for 18 years, and were certainly in power, with less than a majority of the votes, which did not seem to trouble them then. Frankly, it is a bit much for the party that abolished the Greater London council without any consultation to lecture us today about the principle of democratic accountability.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Like the Secretary of State, we agree that the overwhelming view of Londoners is that there should be democratic government for London. Will the right hon. Gentleman answer one simple question? Will the proposal in the Bill be the first of England's regional governments, or merely another form of local government?

Mr. Prescott: It is in between, in a way—[*Laughter.*] Perhaps I can justify my point. The proposed authority is not similar to any local government authority as we know it. It will be a new type of city government, with a city executive and an elected mayor. There are no other examples of that in this country. Therefore, it is fair to say that it not the normal local government structure. Nor is it the regional structure, although, as the hon. Gentleman knows, I am an advocate of regional government.

A body that governs 7 million inhabitants will clearly have strategic and regional features, but we are discussing a city government with an elected mayor, which one would not normally expect a regional authority to have—not according to my concept of regional government. There are clear distinctions. This will be a new type of city government.

Mr. Hughes: That answer is helpful. Having created that form of government for London, would it need to be changed to make it the sort of regional government to which the Labour party and the right hon. Gentleman have been committed? Will it be the first of a series of similar types of regional governments, or would there need to be further changes to enable London to have a regional government, which was a commitment in the Labour manifesto?

Mr. Prescott: I have no doubt that reform will continue. As the Prime Minister reminds us constantly, change, change, change is always on the agenda. This is the part of the process that deals with an important capital city. London is the only capital city that does not have a government or an elected chief executive or mayor. We are attempting to correct that. The people of London showed in the referendum that that is precisely what they want.

[Mr. Prescott]

Hopefully, the next stage of devolution might be regional government, which I certainly want. However, as the hon. Gentleman knows, embarking on that course of action would involve much consultation with many local authorities, which have different views on what the next stage of local or regional government should be. That will not be happening this side of a general election, although I declare my interest in the process.

There will be a new type of city government—indeed, a new style of politics for London. There will be a directly elected mayor, to provide leadership, and a 25-member assembly to scrutinise the mayor's work, approve his budget and ensure full accountability to the people of London, working with all of London—business, the boroughs and the voluntary sector—and delivering integrated solutions.

The structures that we are about to put in place will create the climate for a truly inclusive form of city governance: fair electoral systems, a duty to consult, a more democratic police authority, obligations to work in partnership with other public bodies, and a regular dialogue with interest groups.

We will create two new bodies dedicated to tackling transport and economic development in the capital, appointed by, and accountable to, the mayor. The London development agency will advise the mayor, and implement the mayor's economic development strategy. The mayor will have a general duty to consult business and other interests. Secondly, the transport for London body will be responsible for implementing the mayor's integrated transport policy for the capital.

As part of a radical, ground-breaking financial agreement, local authorities that introduce pilot road-user and workplace charging schemes will retain 100 per cent. of the net revenue for at least 10 years. The money can be spent only on transport projects in the London transport strategy. There will be a review of this after 10 years.

We will create a new, accountable police authority, which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will say more about tomorrow. We will create a new publicly owned and accountable underground system, through a public-private partnership.

I turn now to the Bill's more [illegible] provisions. Part I deals with the creation of the author[illegible] and the elections. The mayor will be elected by the supplementary vote system, which will provide a clear mandate from the people of London. The 25-member assembly will be elected by the additional member system, so the views of Londoners will be closely reflected in its political make-up.

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): For the benefit of hon. Members, and of Londoners as a whole, can the right hon. Gentleman explain exactly how, under the formula, votes will be apportioned between candidates on the list—not the directly elected members? How does the formula work?

Mr. Prescott: Fourteen members will be directly elected for the 14 areas concerned, the boundaries of which will be considered.

Mr. Wilkinson: What about the list?

Mr. Prescott: I am trying to put the matter in context. Eleven members will be elected on the basis of people's votes for a party. A party that gets 50 per cent. of the votes in that section will get 50 per cent. of the 11 members on the additional list.

Mr. Wilkinson: Half a member?

Mr. Prescott: I should have chosen my percentages better, but my secondary modern education did not go quite that far. The same principles will apply in Scotland and Wales, which will give us some understanding of what is likely to happen when we debate the Bill in Committee. The mayor will be elected by the supplementary vote.

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): On the method chosen for electing the mayor, it would be possible to elect one who did not have majority support. With voting in two separate columns, the only votes that will be counted on the second count will be those of people who have voted for one of the two main candidates. Would it not be simpler to use a system that my right hon. Friend and I are both used to in the Labour party? An eliminating ballot would guarantee that the mayor would be elected with the majority of votes.

Mr. Prescott: I well understand my hon. Friend's point, particularly with reference to the Labour party. It usually meant that the person who started with the fewest votes, and who was the most unpopular candidate, eventually came through; it was sometimes my hon. Friend. We have made a judgment, and chosen this system. That means that the mayor will get an overwhelming vote. It is important to have a mayor with a majority of support in London. That is why we have used the supplementary vote in this way.

The method also means that only two counts will take place—the main count and the additional one for distributing the supplementary votes between the top two candidates. I think that that is the fairest way. No doubt points will be made about that, but that is the formula we put in the referendum, and the Bill implements what we agreed in that.

I take this opportunity to confirm the date of the first elections to the authority: subject to passage of the Bill, the elections will take place on 4 May 2000. As hon. Members will know, that is the normal date for local elections, so we think it right to hold them on that day. In less than 18 months, the mayor and the assembly will be elected to give London the strong leadership and democratic accountability it so desperately needs.

The assembly will represent the views of all Londoners. However, we are aware that that very openness and accessibility carry risks. Therefore, we are including in the Bill a provision enabling an electoral threshold to be set, so as to avoid the assembly giving a platform to extremist parties. However, a balance needs to be struck, because of the need to ensure that legitimate parties are not unfairly excluded from the political process. For that reason, we have set a maximum threshold of 5 per cent., and any threshold can be set only after debate in both Houses of Parliament.

Part II of the Bill covers general functions and procedures, and discharges an important manifesto commitment. We are creating a general purpose for the authority, which is to promote economic and social

development in Greater London and the improvement of its environment. The mayor will not be able to use that power to extend the GLA's role into borough activities; nor will it extend the authority's remit into the management of health services or further education, as suggested by the Liberal Democrats.

The GLA will be a lean and strategic authority—one whose powers and responsibilities were clearly set out and approved in the referendum in May. The Government will maintain a reserve power to set financial limits on the use of the power, to ensure that the new responsibility is not abused. We are giving the mayor real powers and real responsibilities. We do not intend to give the GLA the ability to extend its own powers by referendum. That is properly a matter for this House.

The new assembly will question the mayor monthly, in public; and ordinary Londoners will be able to question the mayor and assembly directly in open question times. The assembly's scrutiny role underlies all its work: it will be consulted on all strategies, and have the power to propose amendments; it will have the power to amend the mayor's budget; it will investigate issues of importance to all of London; and it will have the power to summon certain categories of witness, giving its scrutiny role real teeth.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): The assembly, in its scrutiny role, can question the mayor, if he turns up to at least one of the six meetings to which he is called for questioning. It can send the mayor reports and make suggestions. However, is it not true that, at that level, the mayor is sufficiently powerful to be able to say, "Thank you and good night," and to go his own way, unless the power of the Secretary of State—the right hon. Gentleman and his successors—is so strong that the mayor could, if the Government of the day wanted, be totally strapped on any action, on financial grounds and on orders that the Secretary of State can impose?

Mr. Prescott: When he has looked through the Bill and listened to the debates, the hon. Gentleman will see that the mayor has been given real powers, but that the assembly has an important checking power in respect of the budget, which will be the most important instrument of decision making for London. If two thirds of the members of the assembly agree that they disagree with the mayor's budget, they can change it. That is a fundamental role that even the Public Accounts Committee here in the House lacks.

We believe that a proper balance has been struck between the powers of the assembly and those of the elected mayor; however, the authority is new and entirely different from what has gone before, so we shall be grateful to hear the views of hon. Members as the Bill progresses.

Mr. Edward Davey (Kingston and Surbiton): The hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) has a point. The Secretary of State is mentioned more than 250 times in the Bill, and he will retain a fair degree of power. The mayor is to hold public debates with the people of London, but will the Secretary of State attend those debates?

Mr. Prescott: We are referring substantial powers to the mayor and the assembly—powers that people have wanted for a long time. The Secretary of State's role in respect of new city government will be as it is in respect of local authorities: it will extend to the balance of powers and resources and to determining whether overall policy is achieved, which are matters proper to the balance between central and local government. The same is true of the relationship between central and regional government: central Government cannot afford to opt out of strategic decisions, so we reserve our rights in respect of such decisions. As the Bill shows, tremendous powers and resources are being given to the mayor and the assembly—billions of pounds will be under their immediate control.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): Where does my right hon. Friend think the Greater London authority will meet? Newspapers carried the picture of the giant car light on its side near Tower bridge, which seemed pretty average to me. What does my right hon. Friend think about this matter?

Mr. Prescott: My hon. Friends who have been dealing with the issue say that they have shortlisted two sites, and I must inform my hon. Friend that one of them is not Leyton.

Mr. Cohen: That is fine.

Mr. Prescott: Good. I am delighted to please another hon. Member.

The assembly's scrutiny role underlies most of the work to which we have referred, and it will be consulted about the strategies and powers of Bills.

The third part of the Bill involves finance—a crucial area in any relationship between central Government and local government. The GLA budget will be placed firmly within the existing financial framework for local authorities, as I have just said. The GLA will set budgets for itself, for the Transport for London body, the Metropolitan police authority, the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, and the London development agency.

Two new Government grants will be established. The first is a new general grant to cover most of the annual costs of the mayor and assembly, estimated at about £20 million. London council tax payers will contribute approximately 20 per cent. of that sum—about 3p a week on a Band D council tax bill, raising approximately £4 million. That is a very small price to pay for giving London the strong directly elected Government it needs.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich) *rose—*

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam) *rose—*

Mr. Prescott: I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Burstow: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way on that point. He said that the new authority will have the same financial control regime as local government generally. Does he accept that the Bill goes further in controlling the authority's ability to decide what it can and cannot do with its finances, by imposing not only spending ceilings but spending floors?

Mr. Prescott: It is true that, in giving grants to this new type of city governance or to local authorities, the

[Mr. Prescott]

Government will want to see that money spent in particular areas. The situation in the London area is no different from that in any other local authority. As to the expenditure of resources over and above the limit, and capping, the authority will be required to meet the Government's financial rules governing public expenditure. The requirement is the same for local authorities. The institution may be different—

Mr. Edward Davey: What about the floors?

Mr. Prescott: There are floors regarding what we expect the authority to spend in certain areas. That is a matter for negotiation with the London authority, as it is with local authorities. We may explore the details of differing levels of expenditure a little more in Committee. The essential relationship between central Government and the London authority is clear: it does not differ greatly from that between central Government and local government as far as the powers defined in the Bill and the raising of resources are concerned.

The second grant is a new GLA transport grant, which consolidates existing transport grants. There will be three key safeguards. First, the mayor must comply with statutory duties imposed upon him or her. Secondly, the mayor will be required to spend earmarked funds on the services for which they are given—which confirms that point that I made earlier to the hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey). Thirdly, the Home Secretary will have a reserve power to set a minimum budget for the Metropolitan police, and powers to ensure that national standards of fire services are maintained. When moneys are given, we will make expenditure levels absolutely clear—particularly with regard to the Metropolitan police and fire services.

Part IV deals with transport, one of the key issues for London and Londoners. The mayor will provide integration of London's transport, ensuring that transport, environment and planning policies fit together. Borough councils manage much of the transport people use today, and they will continue to play a key role. However, they will do so within the context of an integrated transport strategy, and they will be required to draw up local plans to implement that strategy.

Transport for London is a new body that will be directly responsible to the mayor. It will help to implement the integrated transport strategy and deliver many key services. The mayor will appoint the members of its board—and perhaps its chair—and will have wide powers of direction over all its activities. Transport for London will take over London Transport's responsibilities for buses and the underground. It will take on responsibility for the Croydon tramlink, new piers and riverbus services, Victoria coach station and the docklands light railway. It will also regulate taxis and minicabs.

Transport for London will take on the management of traffic and road maintenance on London's strategic roads, which is currently the responsibility of the Highways Agency and London boroughs. It will take on the work of the traffic director for London, the traffic control systems unit and the Public Carriage Office.

I shall say a few words about the public-private partnership for the London Underground, which I announced to the House in March. London Transport has now consulted a cross-section of potential bidders, lenders and other transport interests. There was a very positive response, although the trade unions raised a number of concerns that London Transport will be addressing with them.

Further work has also been done to develop the details of the public-private partnership structure. As a result, London Transport will take the following step towards establishing a publicly owned and publicly accountable underground system: London Underground will be restructured during the first half of next year into an operating division, which will remain in the public sector, and three infrastructure divisions based on groupings of lines.

The aim will be to invite expressions of interest from potential infrastructure bidders early next year. I want the public-private partnership to be implemented as quickly as possible, so that passengers can begin to enjoy the real benefits that a modernised underground can bring, but I shall not rush that timetable.

In particular, I do not want to commit London Transport to a date by which the PPP must be completed. Negotiating against a self-imposed deadline would clearly compromise value for money. The Public Accounts Committee has warned against such an approach, to ensure that the taxpayer is protected. The previous Administration ignored such advice in their rush to privatise the railways and their assets, and we now know the full price for not taking due consideration of taxpayers' interests. We do not intend to repeat that mistake, or to have to go before the Public Accounts Committee to justify it.

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): If the Deputy Prime Minister is paying attention to Select Committees' views, will he pay attention to the Transport Sub-Committee, which described his proposals as a convoluted compromise?

Mr. Prescott: It is difficult for me to know how the Committee came to that conclusion until I am aware of the results of its work. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody) is here, and I am sorry that I did not give way to her earlier.

Mrs. Dunwoody: Will my right hon. Friend give way to me now?

Mr. Prescott: Yes.

Mrs. Dunwoody: My right hon. Friend will be delighted to hear that that is all the Sub-Committee called his proposals, and I can assure him that its comment was based on precisely the sort of arguments that he is making now. Will he make it clear that any incoming local government will face the enormous problem of capital costs for the underground system? I hope that the authority will have sufficient flexibility to consider all sorts of partnerships, because, as he said, the Public Accounts Committee has pointed out that, as a result of the sale of the railways, he and I and the rest of the taxpayers ended up with the worst deal and the largest bill.

Mr. Prescott: I should have said that another reason why we do not intend to repeat the mistakes of the

previous Government is that we would have to appear before the Transport Sub-Committee, which is chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich, to explain why we had made such a mess of things. Her Committee has pointed out the mistakes of the previous Government, as has the Public Accounts Committee.

The previous Administration made fundamental mistakes on capital and revenue support, because they rushed the bridges. They wanted to keep to a political timetable, and all the evidence clearly shows that the public interest paid a heavy price. That is not to say that we disagree with the involvement of public-private partnerships in our proposals, but we shall not get involved in a privatisation process such as that undertaken by the previous Government. If we do not handle assets carefully, we will be properly indicted by bodies such as the Transport Sub-Committee and the Public Accounts Committee. I do not intend to allow that to happen.

Any agreement that is made with regard to assets must be scrutinised by the Committees, which will judge whether the final arrangements are convoluted or unjustified. I hope that I will not be condemned in such a way or have to face the wrath of my hon. Friend the Member for Crewe and Nantwich in the Transport Sub-Committee, which spurs us on to ensure that we get things right. That is another reason why our solution will be determined not by a timetable but by the best value for the public.

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): Will the Secretary of State take this opportunity to confirm how the on-going costs of the public-private partnership will be paid? Do the Government expect that the on-going costs of the contract will be paid for out of congestion charges or parking levies that the mayor will impose?

Mr. Prescott: That is not a judgment for me. It will be for the mayor to decide how he or she—[HON. MEMBERS: "She."] He or she will decide. The important issue is how the resources will be raised and then spent on transport. If there is a delay, the project will pass to the Transport for London body, make no mistake about that. However, the judgment as to how the finances are raised and then distributed among the various forms of transport in London will be for the mayor to make, in discussion with the Secretary of State, who has to consider transport plans for London as for every local authority. That provides the necessary checks and balances. As I said, I will not go ahead unless I am convinced that the bid represents the best value for money.

On the timetable, let me make it clear that, once the final bidding process is under way, the Government need to see it through. If, as now seems likely, the bidding process runs beyond the GLA elections in May 2000, we will put in place suitable arrangements to involve the mayor during that transitional period, following which London Underground would become the full responsibility of the mayor of London. We shall table appropriate amendments in due course to replace the regulation-making powers, so Parliament will have the proper opportunity to scrutinise as the Bill passes through the House.

A world-class city depends on a world-class transport system. We intend to deliver that.

The Bill has eight other parts. In view of the time necessary for today's debate, I shall not go into every detail of them, but shall refer to them briefly. We will create a new Metropolitan police authority, bringing democratic accountability to policing in London, and a new authority responsible for fire and emergency planning in the capital, inheriting staff, functions and powers from the current London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority. As I have already said, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will deal with these provisions when he opens the debate tomorrow.

I shall briefly touch on parts V and VIII of the Bill, which deal with the London development agency and planning respectively. The London development agency will be in the regional development agency for London, mirroring the RDAs in other parts of the country, and bringing new opportunities where they are needed most, thereby increasing the possibility of jobs and prosperity in London. Business-led, it will advise the mayor, carry out the development functions delegated to it by central Government, and implement the mayor's economic development strategy. It will also tackle social and economic problems across the capital.

Under part VIII, the mayor's new strategic planning role will give the opportunity to provide a real vision for London. Boroughs will remain the planning authorities in their areas, but their development plans will have to conform to the mayor's strategy.

Mr. Burstow: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that those two parts of the Bill appear to involve a potential conflict of interest in terms of the mayor exercising his responsibilities? The mayor appoints the London development agency board and approves its strategy, but he also develops and approves a strategy for the spatial development of London. He can then require conformity with that, and also insist that local authorities refuse planning permission in accordance with it. Does that not lead to a conflict of interest? How is it to be resolved?

Mr. Prescott: I do not think that there is a conflict of interest, but I look forward to the debates in which we can examine the matter in more detail. The mayor decides on the strategic plan—the plan for spatial development, as the hon. Gentleman says—which is agreed with the assembly. That carries with it democratic accountability, and the force and powers in the Bill to make sure that the boroughs comply with it.

If there is a dispute, as the hon. Gentleman suggests there may be, it will be referred back to me as Secretary of State. That is what happens in local authorities—there has to be a reserve appeal. If there is a conflict between the boroughs and the London authority, it is perhaps wise to have a reserve power residing with the Secretary of State, especially in planning matters.

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): Would not it help to remove the fear of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) and others, including myself, if the mayor did not have the power to direct a borough to refuse a planning application? Presumably the applicant will be able to appeal to the Secretary of State. As the Secretary of State can call in any significant planning application for public inquiry or his determination, why cannot the mayor's additional and unnecessary power be removed?

Mr. Prescott: I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman agrees, but our planning procedures are not

[Mr. Prescott]

the most modern. In fact, many people are calling for changes to them. We are changing a great deal of the planning regulations. The new citywide body, which will have a planning function, will be very closely involved with development.

Is the hon. Member suggesting that we keep the old system, which was for ever bogged down in conflict between the boroughs? If we want a strategic approach, we must give the mayor and the assembly the responsibility to devise a strategic plan. That may create conflict, but we presume that the mayor will have the overriding right to impose a decision—although there will of course be a right to appeal to the Secretary of State.

I do not want to be involved in disputes at the first showing. I want to be able to measure the borough's decision against the strategic plan that has been agreed by the mayor and the assembly. That is the judgment, on balance, that I am making, although I will listen to arguments in Committee to find out how hon. Members feel.

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): I remain a touch confused. I thought that the most modern idea of planning was that it worked best if it was devised from the bottom up and was owned by the people to whom it related. That suggests that boroughs should feed to the mayor their views of the development they want in their areas. The mayor would then have to negotiate with the boroughs from the bottom up, rather than imposing decisions from the top down. Could the right hon. Gentleman enlighten me?

Mr. Prescott: The strategic plan will be based on the boroughs' views, but somebody must make a strategic decision. It is very difficult to get all boroughs to agree, so a strategic plan will be drawn up. I have given the example of the Secretary of State's involvement where there is conflict. The GLA is a new citywide authority with an elected mayor. We will try to strike a balance. I am prepared, as I have said, to listen to arguments in Committee as they are developed. I am describing the balance that we have struck. The approach is modern and streamlined, which will meet the needs of London.

Parts IX and X, on culture and the environment, will deal with Londoners' quality of life. Culture contributes more to London's economy than any other sector, apart from finance. The Bill provides that, for the first time, a strategic approach will be taken to the development of one of the capital's most important assets. As important as Londoners' quality of life is that of the environment. The mayor will be required to prepare a periodic report on the environment of the capital, draw up an action plan to safeguard London's wildlife, and limit noise. The mayor will have powers to tackle waste, air quality and congestion.

In 1986, the Conservative party abolished the Greater London council, against the will of the people and without consultation or so much as a "by your leave". Since then, London has struggled on without leadership or accountability. It is governed by cliques and cabals, shadowy committees, background deals and quangos. Its infrastructure is decaying, traffic problems are worsening, and poverty and social exclusion are deepening. That is why our manifesto commitment was overwhelmingly endorsed both in the general election and the May referendum. This Bill will give Londoners back their voice.

In May, the people of London gave a resounding yes in the referendum. I hope that the House will say yes to Londoners. Londoners want world-class government for a world-class city. I hope that the House will overwhelmingly endorse the people's expressed will.

5.4 pm

Mrs. Gillian Shephard (South–West Norfolk): I beg to move, To leave out from 'That' to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

'this House, while welcoming the proposal for a directly elected mayor for Greater London, declines to give a second reading to the Greater London Authority Bill because, instead of creating an Assembly consisting of representatives nominated by each London borough and the Corporation of London, which would best serve London's interests, it provides for the establishment of a directly elected assembly which would diminish the status of the London boroughs and would be likely to lead to conflict between the boroughs and the Greater London Authority; and because, in failing to provide for the transfer of London Underground to the private sector so as to boost investment and in proposing the imposition of new taxes on motorists in London to pay for cuts in central government spending, the Bill offers an inadequate response to the problems of transport in London.'

May I begin by apologising to the House for the fact that, owing to a very long-standing engagement, I shall be unable to be present for the winding-up speeches? I have written to the Deputy Prime Minister and regret any discourtesy to him, his hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London and the House. Tomorrow, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) will deal with the aspects of the Bill that concern the policing of London, and its constitutional aspects.

The Bill is a very substantial piece of legislation—twice the size of the Bills that became the Scotland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 1998 combined—and in effect, as the Secretary of State admitted this afternoon, it will set up a new form of government. It is essentially an experiment, and we have deep concerns about it. Those concerns are expressed in our reasoned amendment, and this evening I intend to outline other areas of concern, which we shall seek to explore and expose in Committee.

The Secretary of State has been very open in his admission that there will need to be quite a lot of clarification in Committee. We are grateful for the fact that he said several times that he would seek to take careful notice of the issues of concern that turned up there.

Our stance will be constructive, because we feel that, if London is to be treated as an experiment for a new type of government, that experiment and that type of government must work. It must work because London's national and international significance cannot be overstated. London is a cosmopolitan community, which reflects all aspects of the human race and human activity, and it is indeed the greatest city on earth. It has a dominant position among the capital cities of the world. Last year, London was voted best city in which to locate a business, best city for external transport links, best city for internal transport and best city for telecommunications. The position of the City of London as the world's leading centre for financial institutions is undisputed.

All that was achieved under 18 years of Conservative Government. In the teeth of the then Labour Opposition, the previous Government freed up London's economy and enabled it to flourish, targeted areas for regeneration, and focused efforts and resources to do so.

I cannot agree with the Secretary of State's remarks about the role of the Greater London council. If anything stood in London's way, it was the Greater London council. It was bloated; it was over-bureaucratic; it spent £2 billion a year to no tangible benefit. It spent a lot of time on gimmick politics. It subsidised underground fares instead of committing to a full programme of investment. Its management of the roads was so bad—

Mr. Livingstone: Although I have clarified the matter several times, Opposition Members keep repeating the allegation that the wicked old GLC subsidised fares instead of putting money into the capital investment programme. Is the right hon. Lady not aware that the entire capital programme for London Transport was controlled by the Secretary of State for Transport and the Secretary of State for the Environment? They had to give prior approval for any item of capital expenditure. Every year, the Greater London council proposed a major capital works programme to the then Tory Government, and every year it was rejected. We never had the choice of choosing.

Mrs. Shephard: I think the figures speak for themselves.

The Greater London council managed the roads so badly that the Government had to take them out of its incompetent hands. Above all, the Greater London council was used as a platform—rather like this debate—to call for such things as abolition of the monarchy and more taxes on business. I believe that this debate is being used as a platform by hopeful mayoral candidates.

We were right to abolish the Greater London council; we make no apology for doing so.

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): Given the right hon. Lady's remarks about the roads, can she confirm that, since the Greater London council was abolished, average traffic speeds in London have drastically declined? Is that not an indictment of the policies pursued by Conservative Governments since 1986?

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Gentleman should know that the economy of London has boomed since that time. I hope that he does not regret that fact.

Sir Paul Beresford: I absolutely agree that London has boomed. Strikingly, the improvement in the London economy just happens to have coincided with the disappearance of the Greater London council. My right hon. Friend has not mentioned the dead hand of the GLC on planning; I am sure that she will do so later. Subsequently, some major London sites were freed up, once the Greater London council—whatever its political complexion—was no longer there to kill the plans dead.

Mrs. Shephard: I agree with my hon. Friend's points. It is curious that before the general election the Labour party told Londoners that it would bring back the Greater London council. It is strange, but there again perhaps it is not, that since the Labour party has come to power it has said time and time again that the Government will not bring it back.

The Bill contains 277 clauses that set powers, bureaucracy, rules, orders, functions, standards, regulations, plans, audits and services, establish committees, set charges and levies and provide for a rash of new agencies of dubious accountability—and much, much more. Against that background, we should perhaps pause to wonder.

We recognise that there is a case for a voice for London. That voice will be the mayor's. Her or his voice will speak up for Londoners to national government and for London on the international stage. It was because we recognised the need for a voice for London that we recommended a yes vote in the referendum. The veterans of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, which was enacted in July, will be well aware that we believed that there should have been two questions in the referendum.

That view, that Londoners should have been allowed by the Government a choice on what the new arrangements for governance would be, was backed—of course, for different reasons—by many in the London Labour party, by London trade unions and by Liberal Democrats. Perhaps if Londoners had been granted that opportunity rather than the somewhat take-it-or-leave-it deal offered by the Government, more than 34 per cent. of Londoners would have been persuaded of the importance of voting. London could then have had a citywide system of government that enjoyed real legitimacy.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The right hon. Lady was good enough to mention that my party was strongly of the view, as was hers, when we considered the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, that there should have been two questions put before the people of London. Is she now saying that it is the Conservative party's policy that democratic accountability for London government is better exercised by one person—only one person to be elected to represent London and make decisions for London, as opposed to the boroughs—than by even the modest 26 people, 25 in an assembly and one in the form of the mayor, proposed by the Government? Surely the more people, within limits, that we have to represent London, the more democratic will be the voice that Londoners have.

Mrs. Shephard: I shall explain exactly what our view is on the role of the London boroughs. I rather think that the hon. Gentleman knows what that view is because it remains as it was at the time of the referendum. It will be the task of the House to ensure that as the Bill passes through its stages the concerns that remain are exposed and responded to by the Government.

We are the first to recognise that a mayor cannot exist in isolation. Clearly there must be checks and balances. There must be a body to scrutinise the mayor's activities. The principles on which we shall judge the Bill and scrutinise the Government's proposals in Committee will be those on which we base our approach to all local government. For example, will the proposals set out in the Bill enhance accountability and transparency? Will they add to or diminish the democratic process? Will they

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encourage people to engage in that process? A few gimmicks such as the people's question time will not be enough and will be seen for what they are.

Is the Bill really a devolution of power or is it a transfer of power to the Secretary of State? We shall be examining carefully any proposals that transfer responsibility currently exercised by local government to the Secretary of State. We need to do so because, as we have seen, the Government like to talk about the devolution of power but are not so enthusiastic when it happens, as Scottish and Welsh Members are finding to their cost. Who knows?—we may even have an intervention on that matter from the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) during the debate.

Sadly, the prospects for the enhancement of transparency, accountability and the involvement of the electorate of London as a result of the Bill are not bright. The Secretary of State spoke of quangos. However, if the Bill is passed in its present form, London will have no fewer than four intermediate layers of government between local authorities and central Government. There will be a mayor, the assembly, the London development agency and the government office for London. There will also be a transport body for London, the Metropolitan police authority, the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority and the cultural strategy group. They will all have something to say on issues affecting Londoners, who will need a lexicon to know who is saying what and on who's behalf.

Mr. Prescott: Is the right hon. Lady saying that the bodies will not be accountable to anyone? They will be accountable to the mayor and the assembly. That is the difference between a quango and a democratically elected body.

Mrs. Shephard: I am saying that the proliferation of organisations and the criss-cross of responsibilities between the various groups of people who will be elected in London will not contribute to the transparency and accountability of the system. It will be almost impossible without a guide for people to work out whom to approach with a query or a problem. The assembly constituencies will be so vast that there will be only the thinnest of constituency links. More than 40 per cent. of assembly members will have no constituency links. There will also be overlapping responsibilities, with an accompanying confusion of accountability. In Committee we shall be seeking to expose how that will work and whether the claimed devolution to the people of London will help them to understand the system.

The voting systems involved do not present the best of starts. Londoners will be asked to vote for their borough councillors on the first-past-the-post system every four years. They will also be asked to vote for the mayor and assembly every four years, but for that they will use the supplementary vote and additional member systems—a curious hybrid of first-past-the-post and a party list system. In the other three years they may be asked to vote for one third of their councillors annually, possibly under first-past-the-post, perhaps eventually under an alternative system yet to be announced and subject to the result of a referendum that may take place before the next election—or after it—on the system proposed by the Jenkins commission. I rest my case on transparency.

I said that one of the key criteria that we would apply was local accountability. That is why our support for a yes vote in the referendum was qualified. We believe that insufficient regard is being paid to the London boroughs and that they should have a greater input to the decision-making process. The boroughs are an effective way of delivering local services. Of course some are better managed than others and all have their good and bad points. There are areas of deprivation and poor standards and there are areas of well managed excellence. There is certainly a sense of civic and local pride and a sense of identity.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): I am encouraged by the right hon. Lady's conversion to transparency and accountability, because that has not been apparent so far in Westminster. Will she bear it in mind that what is happening in Westminster sits uncomfortably with what we are proposing for local government and for London? Our proposals might make abuse of power, including the lack of local accountability that we have seen in Westminster, a lot less likely.

Mrs. Shephard: I knew that someone would mention Westminster, because Labour Members always do. It is perfectly possible for us to raise counter points, such as Hackney, or, if we are going outside London, Doncaster, where there is a police inquiry room in the council headquarters. There is nothing to be gained from such an exchange. We are trying to examine the proposals in the Bill and decide whether they will make things better for the people of London. The question is whether the system will be clearer, more transparent and more accountable as a result of the Bill.

Mr. Soley: That is the point. We are saying that we can learn from experiences such as Westminster's. We are putting forward proposals that work. The right hon. Lady is saying that the current system provides local accountability; we are saying that we need different systems.

Mrs. Shephard: Of course Labour Members require different systems. That is why they are introducing the Bill. The Opposition's task is to decide whether that will provide an improvement for the people of London. We have already said that we are in favour of a voice for London—that will be the mayor's voice—but the responsibility of the House and its procedures is to see whether this great Bill, with its 277 clauses, will provide a better answer for Londoners than the status quo.

Our view at the time of the referendum was that the assembly would be better comprised of 33 assembly members—nominated representatives from each of the 32 London boroughs and from the Corporation of London. Those women and men, through their own councillors, know what is happening on the ground. They speak with authority on London matters and reflect the diverse voice of London. That view was not extreme; it was widely supported during the referendum campaign. Whatever the Government's reaction to the proposal, it might at least have been worth putting to the people of London in the referendum. We thought that Londoners should have had the choice.

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): Has the right hon. Lady discussed that particular idea with the representatives of the London boroughs? If she does so, she might discover the clear statement from the Association of London Government, confirmed in writing to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister today, that the proposal that the assembly should be made up simply of representatives nominated by the London boroughs

"is not a view shared by the majority of Boroughs in the Association of London Government."

Mrs. Shephard: The hon. Gentleman will find that the *Evening Standard* survey provided the answer to his question, which is that there was a great deal of support for our proposal. If he was so confident, he might at least have put the choice to Londoners. There should have been two questions in the referendum. There was wide support for that, which is why tomorrow we shall urge hon. Members to support our reasoned amendment.

Mr. Simon Hughes: To pursue the intervention by the Minister for London and Construction, does not the right hon. Lady accept that her party's proposal for the leaders of the 33 local authorities to make up the assembly is flawed, first, because they can meet anyway—and do so, through the Association of London Government—and secondly, because they would, by definition, come to argue the case for their local authority? People could not have a strategic view of the concerns of London if they were there to defend their corner. That would be a bit like going to Vienna to argue for Britain, as opposed to having the view of the European Parliament or the Commission, which is a slightly wider view of Europe.

Mrs. Shephard: If the hon. Gentleman thinks that the newly elected members of the GLA will have no constituency concerns, he is much more optimistic than I am. Indeed, I can hardly believe that that is what the Government have in mind; otherwise they would have had them all elected on a Londonwide basis and none of them representing any parts of London. No doubt the Government will deal with the hon. Gentleman's question later.

Our concerns do not stop there. The Bill sets out the mayor's core responsibilities. As the White Paper made clear, she or he is to oversee transport for London, the major part of which was to be responsibility for London Underground. This afternoon, the right hon. Gentleman seems to have revealed that his plans for restructuring London Underground will not be ready by May 2000, or possibly not for some years after that. That seems to be an admission that his plans for London Underground are in disarray, and a vindication of our warnings to him that they would be.

Mr. Prescott: I have been at the job only 18 months. I announced in March that we would go for the public-private partnership. It is a complex deal that has to put together three infrastructure companies and separate a public operating company. That takes time. Even in proposals where the last Government were involved in such areas, it took a considerable time—a year, two years, three years. I do not envisage that happening in this case.

We have made an assessment, and I believe that it is possible to proceed with it. We will share out these assets between the publicly operating company and the infrastructure companies. I hope that their bids will come in, and believe that they will, but I am not prepared to set a time that will help people to negotiate to put me against the wall, which is precisely what happened with the previous Government. It cost hundreds of millions of pounds last time, and I will not make that mistake.

Mrs. Shephard: Whether it is a public-private partnership or a convoluted compromise depends on how one looks at it. The right hon. Gentleman has been forced to admit that he is having great difficulties delivering his plan. The Treasury forced him to give up the annual £500 million to London Underground by 2000, so he asked the private sector to give him that sum to invest in the underground. However, because he has left in place the management who are making a hash of the job, there are complications in putting together a deal.

Mr. Prescott: I do not follow the right hon. Lady's argument. The underground has a new managing director and a new chairman has to be appointed because I got rid of the previous one—that is by any definition a change of management.

I have had to deal with the £365 million cut in the underground investment programme that was made in the Tories' last Budget. We restored that money and sustainable investment. She is right to say that it was assumed that, if we made progress, the money would come from the public-private partnership by 2000. It is not clear whether we will achieve that target, but if we do not, we will deal with the problem and review matters properly. Having restored the resources that the Tories cut, we will not undermine the underground.

Mrs. Shephard: If the right hon. Gentleman is so concerned about the cuts, it is extraordinary that should continue to take £500 million from London Underground.

Mr. Prescott: Will the right hon. Lady say where the £500 million is being taken from? Our commitment was for three years; we hoped that, in 2000, the money would come from a public-private partnership. We will wait to see whether that happens.

Mrs. Shephard: It has not happened.

Mr. Prescott: It has not happened yet, as we are still waiting for the bids. The proposals do not apply until 2000, which, as the right hon. Lady may have noticed, has not arrived. Unlike the previous Administration, we will not sacrifice the investment in the underground.

Mrs. Shephard: The right hon. Gentleman seems to be saying that he is in a mess. In the transport White Paper, he announced the withdrawal of the subsidy. He now says that the plans to replace that subsidy will not be in place by 2000, but he cannot say when they will be. I hope that, in winding up, the Minister for Transport in London will explain what will happen if those plans are not in place, as the right hon. Gentleman does not seem to know.

The White Paper contained a lot of high-flown talk about an integrated transport policy for London, but if, as the right hon. Gentleman wants, the mayor has responsibility for London Underground, that will be a ball and chain. The right hon. Gentleman is not clear whether

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the public-private partnership will work or when it will work. He is not bringing in private sector management expertise, so the responsibility will be a ball and chain for the mayor. The sooner he accepts that, the better, although we can, of course, examine the matter in Committee.

The withdrawal of funding from London Underground affects the Bill's proposals for congestion charging—another matter of concern for the Conservative party—about which the right hon. Gentleman did not say much in his opening speech. Obviously, we share the concern about the effects of traffic congestion on health and on the economy. Pollution is also a problem, even though emissions from cars are infinitely cleaner than they were 20 years ago. To use the motorist as an income stream, however, is not the answer.

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): Will the right hon. Lady take this opportunity to distance herself from her friends on Westminster city council, who last week wrote to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister asking for powers on traffic congestion as soon as possible, including the power to examine the feasibility of congestion charging?

Mrs. Shephard: I expect the hon. Lady will find an opportunity to read the Bill and reply to Westminster city council herself. Are not congestion charges only a means to clobber the motorist yet again? The right hon. Gentleman has not delivered on his promises, as he admitted this afternoon.

Mr. Prescott *rose—*

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington) *rose—*

Mrs. Shephard: The right hon. Gentleman wants to intervene, so I give way to him.

Mr. Prescott: The right hon. Lady has said that she is not in favour of introducing a new income stream. Is she distancing herself from the previous Government's Green Paper which made it clear, after analysis, that there would be a presumption in favour of introducing legislation in due course to enable congestion charging? That conclusion was right, and we included it in our White Paper. We also discussed whether the money should be related directly to transport expenditure. We have made it clear in our document on congestion that the 100 per cent. stated in the Bill will be applied, and that we will review the matter after 10 years. That is a fair assessment, and there is an admitted principle in terms of hypothecation. Has the right hon. Lady got the Opposition Treasury team to agree to hypothecation during that 10-year period—or, if the Conservatives were ever to be elected, would they scrap it?

Mrs. Shephard: The right hon. Gentleman's position on hypothecation is a bit vague—even in terms of the Bill. We are not against the principle of road charging on the basis that people thereby pay for what they are using.

The Secretary of State is taking £0.5 billion from London Underground. The public-private partnership which was to provide the investment to repay the subsidy for London Underground is in disarray, as he has said this afternoon. He is imposing more taxes on the motorist, but whether that money from the motorist will go into public transport improvements is a moot point. His own document, "Breaking the Logjam", cast doubt on whether the money would be hypothecated, and schedule 13 of the Bill contains the stated intention that the proceeds of those charges should go into the Consolidated Fund.

For the Secretary of State to claim, on the one hand, that he will hypothecate congestion charges to invest in public transport while, with his other hand, he is taking £0.5 billion out of London Underground is frankly so incredible that, tomorrow night, we shall have to urge the House to accept our reasoned amendment.

Mr. Prescott: It may be a reasoned amendment, but it is not a reasoned argument. I have not said, and it is not true, that we have taken £0.5 billion out of London Underground—it is exactly the opposite. We put that amount in, following the comprehensive spending review. I have conceded that, in the last year, we hope to receive funding from the public-private partnership, but we must wait and see.

Bidding means that we do not know what people will offer—it is called negotiation. If the right hon. Lady thinks that she should know the amount of a bid before it is offered, that shows why the previous Administration got into such a mess, and cost the privatisation process billions of pounds. *[Interruption.]* Let us not contest that point—the Select Committees have made it clear. She has now admitted that the Opposition agree that a new income stream can come from charging. That is not what she was saying five minutes ago. That new income stream was in the Green Paper. Let us agree that she agrees with that, anyway—whatever she was saying five minutes ago. That much is clear. What we are saying—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I appreciate that the Secretary of State is responding to points made in the debate, but interventions are getting longer and longer. A great number of hon. Members wish to speak today, and of course there will be an opportunity for Government and Opposition Front Benchers to wind up at the end of the debate.

Mr. Prescott: I apologise, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The money will be used for those transport purposes for 10 years—as we have made clear in the document on congestion. The period of time beyond that is for the House to judge in a review. We are agreed on hypothecation—does the right hon. Lady agree on hypothecation?

Mrs. Shephard: If the Secretary of State refers to the comprehensive spending review, he will see that funding for London Underground is to be phased out by 2000. That is what I mean when I say that he is taking £0.5 billion a year from London Underground. He has admitted this afternoon that he is not at all sure when the public-private partnership will come into place to get that sorted. Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for reminding the Secretary of State that he has had his say.

I wish to ask a few questions of principle to which the Minister might like to respond when she winds up later this evening. Who can remove the mayor, and by what

mechanisms? Under what circumstances will the mayor be able to intervene in local planning decisions? How was the pledge in the White Paper that the new arrangements will cost Londoners 3p a week calculated, and why has the London School of Economics computed the cost at a great deal higher? How will consistency be achieved between the planning strategy of the London development agency and the spatial development strategy? Will the mayor set environmental targets? Should London, the least typical of all our cities, be the guinea pig in this experiment?

We agree that London should have a voice. We support the concept of a mayor for London, but the Bill as drafted will do little for transparency, accountability or the people's involvement in London's governance. It is a recipe for conflict at every one of the layers of government that it will insert into the way London is run. It makes the capital and the people who live and work there guinea pigs.

The Deputy Prime Minister failed to explain how the Bill and his funding plans will deliver improved transport systems for Londoners or, even more important, how the experiment will fit into the piecemeal and ill thought out constitutional reform on which the Government have embarked. London is worth more than the Bill. We will urge the House tomorrow to support our amendment.

5.36 pm

Mr. Ken Livingstone (Brent, East): Personally, I look forward to the voice for London having a distinctly nasal quality.

If the speech that we have just heard from the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) is an indication of what the passage of the Bill holds in store, it is clear that the Opposition will have to accept, as they did with the Scottish Parliament, that once people have voted in a referendum, the major issues are settled and it is now important to get the details right.

The most important detail, which did not come out in the right hon. Lady's speech, is that it would be a great mistake to confuse this proposal with the talk about mayors being elected in other parts of the country. Those mayors would be within the existing structure of local government, which delivers personal services such as housing and social security, but the Bill contains a package of powers that is the first stage towards regional government for England.

There might be some confusion. When the Government, in their second term, set up regional authorities for the rest of England, as I hope they will, perhaps they will not call the leaders of those authorities mayors. The Bill adds up to something much closer to the German Länder than the city authorities that are the subject of another Bill. I welcome that, because throughout my political career I have never doubted that the centralisation of power in Britain—the idea that everything can be run from Whitehall—is completely and fundamentally wrong.

To give but one simple example, when I was elected to the Greater London council in 1973, within a year or two—it was nothing to do with me—the council proposed to the then Labour Government the extension of the Jubilee line to docklands. That Government, on Treasury advice, turned it down on the ground of cost. The following Conservative administration of the late Sir Horace Cutler went to the outgoing Labour Government and then to the incoming Government of Baroness Thatcher with a proposal that the council should build the Jubilee line extension to docklands, and the Thatcher Government rejected it.

My administration at the GLC in 1981 made exactly the same proposal. The people representing London were consistently right about the need for the line, and we would not now be biting our nails wondering whether it will be finished in time if London's representatives had been allowed to go ahead and get it built; it would have been running for the past 10 years, and we would no doubt have been able to go on to develop the Chelsea-Hackney link or other projects. In the same way, it was pressure from the old London county council that advanced the issue of a barrier across the Thames to protect London from flooding. Therefore, I am delighted to see the restoration of some form of democracy to Londoners.

I had grave reservations about the idea of separately elected mayors and authorities, but my concerns were mostly resolved by the decision to pay members of the assembly. Under the original proposals in the consultation document, it would have been impossible for the members of the assembly to operate any effective check on the mayor if they had not held full-time, salaried posts. Those tasks will occupy them fully.

I take up a point raised by the Opposition: how can a mayor be removed? It is not enough to say, "At the next election, via the voters." Our system of democracy is such that if leaders in national or local politics lose their grip or the situation becomes dubious, members of their party can remove them. When I was the leader of the GLC, the other 91 members watched me like a hawk, or like 91 hawks and I always had the impression that the Labour members were even more rigorous in their scrutiny than the Conservative members. I cannot see a way to remove the mayor in the Bill.

Let us imagine a nightmare scenario. Imagine that Lady Porter had not been forced to become an international fugitive from justice and move abroad the £27 million that she owes the Westminster residents, and suppose that by some horrible chance she had been elected mayor and then all the scandal of her misuse of council funds had come to light. The Bill contains nothing that would allow her removal. Rich people, as we have seen, use all the mechanisms and expensive barristers to delay and delay. I hope that, in Committee, we can—on a tripartisan basis—find a mechanism to insert in the Bill that would allow the removal of the mayor, in exceptional circumstances.

Mr. Wilkinson: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point with which the House and most Londoners will have total sympathy, because they want the mayor to be accountable and replaceable, if he performs badly. The assembly will be able to modify the budget with a two thirds majority vote. Should that be sufficient to remove the mayor, or should a 51 per cent. majority of the assembly constitute a vote of no confidence and a sufficient justification for disqualification of the mayor?

Mr. Livingstone: There are two obvious methods. We could have the American system of a recall, in which a petition from Londoners, perhaps requiring 500,000 or

[Mr. Livingstone]

1 million signatures, could remove the mayor, but that might be difficult to organise. However, if we give the assembly a two thirds majority veto over the mayor's budget, it may be more effective to have the power of removal of the mayor resting with the assembly. It must be possible to draft legislation to ensure that that is not done on a partisan basis. As we have seen on the three occasions that the question of removal of an American president has been considered, it is unlikely that the mayor would be removed simply on a partisan basis. If so, there would be a backlash among Londoners. We must consider the question of removal of the mayor in Committee, because it would be a nightmare if someone recently elected were exposed as being at the centre of a network of dubious manoeuvres, as Lady Porter was, but was able to delay and drag the matter out from court to court and to remain in office for the full term.

The 5 per cent. threshold for the selection of an assembly member off the list is another point that worries me slightly. It may seem a small point, but it could cause festering ill will. Given that there will be 25 assembly members, someone would need 4 per cent. of the vote to get in fairly, but the Bill would add a further 1 per cent. barrier. Suppose a Green candidate got 4.9 per cent. of the vote, but was told that the seat would go to the Labour, Conservative or Liberal party. A 5 per cent. barrier would seem to discriminate against the Green party, and that party should have its voice heard in the new assembly.

The date of the election also concerns me. The Deputy Prime Minister announced that it will be 4 May 2000. I am confused by that. Shortly after the general election, the Prime Minister said that when he stood at the millennium dome a minute before midnight with his finger poised over the button that will set it rotating—or whatever it will do—he would want the newly elected mayor of London to be standing by his side as a symbol of a new Britain in a new millennium. Ever since I moved into first placé in the polls, that item seems to have slipped back on the agenda.

There is no case for putting off the election until May 2000. With a bit of luck, the Bill could become law by the summer, and we could easily have an election in the autumn. Londoners have waited so long for a democratic voice. I hope that we can return to the election date in Committee.

Once the Bill has become law, the electoral mechanism should be put in place immediately. If it is not, the mayor will be elected along with the assembly in May 2000, and he or she will inherit budgets drafted by the Government and will have to appoint staff and so on. Effectively, the mayor will not take real control of the authority until the start of the following financial year. If the assembly and the mayor could be elected in autumn 1999, they would be in a position to impose their will on the budgets being drawn up, to get the key staff into place and to become a fully functioning authority for the start of the financial year in 2000. I see no reason for further delay. Londoners have waited too long. The Bill must clear the House of Lords by the summer, and we expect it to clear the House of Commons by the end of March, with a bit of luck.

No one could disagree with most of the items in the Bill. I am sure that the Tories will find some matters on which to disagree, but the powers being given to the mayor are obvious and commonsense powers. However, we should also consider what powers are not being given to the mayor. Perhaps appeals against borough planning decisions should go to the mayor rather than to the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions. If we are to give serious power to the mayor and the assembly, we must re-examine the powers that will remain with the Secretary of State to see whether we can devolve planning powers further. The mayor might be able to call in the Secretary of State as the final authority on the major planning issues.

One big weakness lies in waste disposal. When the GLC was abolished, there was one waste disposal authority for London. It was on the verge of making major strides towards bringing environmental principles to waste disposal. The Tory Government of the day took the view that that authority should be broken into four or five nice privatised chunks so that they could make a bob or two on the side. There has never been any justification for that action, and the subsequent years have brought the lunacy of Westminster council stopping the removal of waste by barge, and putting it back on the roads. There is a crying case for a single waste disposal authority for London, organised and operated by the mayor and the assembly.

The mayor's limited involvement in health is a good step forward, but the mayor and the assembly would clearly be ideal to become the health authority for London. If people had been able to influence a mayor who had had control over that area during the past 20 years, we would not have seen the systematic destruction of so many of our hospitals and the loss of so many bed spaces.

Logically, the development agency that will be established for London will need a close link with further and higher education in the capital. Since the abolition of the Inner London education authority, further education institutions have been forced to compete for students who bring in the quickest return for the least expenditure. We do not have one central Londonwide body to ensure that the widest spread of courses are available for Londoners and are dispersed properly throughout London, as happened under the ILEA.

I must also raise again the question of some tax-raising authority. In my response to the White Paper, which I circulated to all hon. Members, I called for the new mayor to have congestion charging and car parking tax-raising powers and I welcome the response that the Prime Minister made to those proposals in his speech to the Labour party conference. That was a good first step, but we should be prepared to trust the people Londoners elect to take such decisions further. I still see no reason why the mayor and assembly of London should not have similar powers to the Scottish Parliament to vary tax for Londoners. That proposal could be a part of the great democratic debate.

I would add those extra provisions because they logically fit into the mayor's powers and would form the pattern of regional government for England that will have become the norm within a generation, I suspect. In many instances, it might be the most important legacy of this Government to the long-term governance of Britain.

I accept that the Government are cautious. London has always been slightly frightening to national Governments. That is why Londoners had to wait 50 years after the rest of the country to get the original London county council. It is always feared that Londoners might be too radical and might elect unsavoury elements to office or some

such thing. They might elect radical socialists, for example. Those fears caused Lord Salisbury to argue for the abolition of the LCC before it was even 10 years old. He said that there was no practice too socialistic or revolutionary that it was not being undertaken by the London county council—nothing seems to change.

As I plough through the Bill, I suspect that an element of that doubt remains. Central Government are worried about giving too much power to Londoners. We can live with that in this Bill, because the task of establishing from scratch the embryonic regional government for London and tackling the transport problem, which is the most appalling and immediate concern, will engage the first assembly and mayor. However, I give notice that it is the duty of the new mayor and assembly, once in office, to study in detail what further powers should be devolved to them. During the second term of this Government, I hope that we will provide regional authorities for the rest of England, which will be strengthened. I hope that we will be able to build with confidence on a successful first attempt at regional government in London.

I welcome the Bill. The Deputy Prime Minister has taken on board some of the concerns raised when the first consultation document was published. I have not the slightest doubt that we can make the proposal work. I certainly intend to do everything that I can to ensure that the Bill is strengthened in Committee. I shall apply to be a member of the Standing Committee and I very much hope that, with the luck of the draw, I may have some role in ensuring that the mayor carries out the will of the Government and creates a good and effective authority for London, which is a matter of pride and which will no doubt lead to Londoners at the next general election saying, "The promise was honoured. We've had a good mayor and a good Administration. They are beginning to tackle the transport problems." I also hope that I can look forward to seeing the Deputy Prime Minister campaign at my side in my struggle to become the Labour party candidate.

5.54 pm

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): I must first put on record the fact that the Deputy Prime Minister said from a sedentary position that he would campaign for the Labour party candidate. As long as the right hon. Gentleman has few powers to intervene in the selection, the Labour party will be pleased.

We welcome the Government's commitment to returning democratic government to London. That was always our position. We shared the Labour party's opposition to the abolition of the Greater London council and the Inner London education authority. The present commitment was in the Labour party manifesto and was the subject of discussions between the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats. We disagreed about the detail and the structure, but we were committed to the principle. Therefore, we are grateful for the introduction of a Bill and, unlike the Conservatives, we will vote for Second Reading tomorrow, just as we voted on Second Reading for the other constitutional legislation to establish a Parliament for Scotland, an Assembly for Wales and regional development agencies for England; to enact human rights legislation and enable human rights to be taken up in our courts; and for elections to the European Parliament to be by a fairer system.

As I told the Minister for London and Construction, we will also co-operate with a timetable which would enable work in this House to be completed by Easter, and in the other place by the summer. We may be left with some supplementary legislation in the spill-over period—orders that might follow from such a large Bill—but the objective should be to hold the election in May 2000, as the Deputy Prime Minister announced to the House. In that matter, I dissent from the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone).

The Deputy Prime Minister did not say what the Government propose to do about the start date of the authority. Perhaps the Minister for Transport in London will give us the answer in her reply. The latest proposal rumoured is that the Government will hold the elections in May 2000, but the authority will come into existence in April. I do not know what people will think of politics if the elections are held after the body is created. It sounds topsy-turvy to us—like something out of Alice in Wonderland.

I have a sensible proposal for the Deputy Prime Minister and I would ask him to be strong—as he sometimes is—with his civil servants. The elections should be held on the first Thursday of May 2000 as he suggests, but the new mayor and members of the assembly should take up their positions on 1 July, which would allow a few weeks for the mayor to choose his or her back-up team and for assembly members to decide who is to lead the assembly. That would bring two benefits for London and, perhaps, even some peripheral advantage to the Government. London would have its new authority halfway through the millennium year. Also, as it cannot be beyond the wit of civil servants and everyone else to realise that the financial year will be divided into one quarter and three quarters: the first quarter would be run under the old order, without a Londonwide government, and the remaining three quarters would be run by the new order.

In the months ahead in Committee, we hope the Deputy Prime Minister and Ministers will seriously consider that option, as it would be a far more logical way to bring London government into existence. It follows the pattern of many other Governments abroad. The American example is the most obvious. The President and Members of Congress are elected in November and they take office in January, having had time to prepare what they want to do.

We will co-operate to get the Bill on to the statute book so that Londoners can vote for a mayor and assembly in 2000, but we will vigorously put forward our constructive criticisms and amendments. We want the body to be Londonwide, democratic and accountable to Londoners, but much less accountable to Ministers in Whitehall. That is why in the instruction on the Order Paper, to which Madam Speaker said we could refer, we listed our five principal objections; and for each we have constructive alternatives.

The objections are, first, that there is far too much central Government power. Secondly—we share this view with the hon. Member for Brent, East—the Bill contains no power to vary the amount of money that is collected from Londoners. Thirdly, the mayor is too powerful relative to the assembly. We think the latter should be more powerful. Fourthly, further education and health should be included—not all education, but further education co-ordination and regional strategic health

[Mr. Simon Hughes]

planning. We are happy to have a lean and mean authority, as the Deputy Prime Minister put it, but we want a healthy and well-educated one too.

Mr. Prescott: They go together.

Mr. Hughes: I am grateful for that concession. I will pocket it and put it back on the table in an agreed form later.

Fifthly, there should be a different electoral system. I concede that the Deputy Prime Minister and others have listened to views expressed and moved from their original position. I am not being churlish—and I am being only slightly mischievous—when I suggest to the right hon. Gentleman that I think I am right in saying that the system for electing the mayor, apart from being conceived in the Cumberland cottage of the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), is used only for the Sri Lankan presidential elections. I have nothing at all against Sri Lankan presidents or their elections, but the system does not appear to have a huge international pedigree. It is also more logical to have a system where people—Londoners are quite competent to do this—can list candidates in order: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. That does not always, or normally, mean that the person who starts bottom ends up top.

Mr. Prescott: It can.

Mr. Hughes: It can, but the Deputy Prime Minister knows that the problem with his supplementary vote system is that it effectively means a two-horse race.

There is no perfect electoral system, and I have never pretended otherwise. I am not one of those nutters for electoral reform: I have always believed that some systems are relative improvements, and I here suggest a relative improvement which I hope the right hon. Gentleman will accept in the new year.

We also propose to the Government that if there is to be a deputy mayor, that person should be chosen by and from the assembly, not appointed by the mayor. I hope that that at least will be conceded.

We propose, as might have been expected from the pedigree of such good ideas, the single transferable vote for the assembly. It is a fairer system, and it is not only us but people who know much more about these things who say so. If we are not to have that, I expect that we will have a bit of an up-and-downer about open or closed lists. The issue is still to be further debated up the road in the Lords in respect of Europe and will be debated in this House and in the Lords in respect of London. We believe that, if we are to have a list system, people should be able to vote for candidates too. That was our view in respect of the European Parliamentary Elections Bill, and we withdrew from it only to get the Bill through. For London, we start from our preferred position: we want open lists so that Londoners can vote for candidates in their preferred order on the list and do not have to have the list as it is given to them.

Mr. Wilkinson: Does the hon. Gentleman propose a region for London and a regionwide list system? STV operates best on a fairly wide regional basis. Is it not the case therefore that there would no guarantee of local representation? The vagaries of selection for the regional list might militate against the very particular interests of various parts of London ever being voiced on the assembly.

Mr. Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is always serious in asking his questions. We will return to the matter in Committee. We did not propose that. I thought that I had sent him a copy of our proposals when we went round this course last year. I shall send him and other colleagues another free copy of "Home Rule for London". We proposed STV in a few multi-member constituencies across London. People would not vote in respect of London as a whole. He would vote in north-west London while people in my area would vote in south-east London. As a fall-back from that—life moves on—Lord Jenkins has proposed an alternative that does some of the things that he wants. It has a first-past-the-post variant so that people can express preferences for constituency seats and a top-up element. We must consider such alternatives. I want to get the best system. I agree that a Londonwide list which might include no one who knows anything about north-east London and the outer boroughs would be inappropriate. We have not supported that.

There were some Government defeats on such issues in the other place. I do not know how brave peers will be in the new year; it depends on whether they get instructions from the Conservative Front-Bench team and, if they get them, whether they follow them. On the assumption that the Opposition might get their act together, we will try to secure amendments in the other place, and for several more months, the numbers in the Lords will still allow us to do that.

We have two other issues, on which we differ fundamentally from the Government, to flag up. The first is small in the context of this great new sort of regional, sort of citywide government, but I have raised it with Ministers before. I hope that in this Bill we can correct an unfairness that affects only London, which is the only part of the United Kingdom where people cannot have parish or community councils if they want them. It would take no more than a clause, and people would not have to have parish or community councils. There is no reason why at local level in London boroughs such as mine with 215,000 people, the people should not be able also to have small parish councils to deal with small parish or community council-type business.

Our vision is of a federal United Kingdom, also with regional government in England, local authorities underneath and parish or community councils below that. That is partnership politics between the layers of government; not the consensus politics of which the White Paper talks, but co-operative politics. The Government missed the opportunity to seize the moment to give us regional government for London. *[Interruption.]* I understand what the Deputy Prime Minister says but I regret it, because we could have gone for regional government, for which he and I have always argued. That means that we will have to come back to this again. That is a pity.

The Deputy Prime Minister is right to concede that this is not regional government. We have done our adding up. There are nearly 600 references in the Bill to local government but less than 100 to regional government. That seems to confirm that what is proposed is more a variant of local government than regional government. That is a pity.

The second matter of apparent difference is the start date, to which I alluded earlier.

I hope that the Government and the people of London find our differences much more constructive than the position taken by the Tories; I am sure they will. The Tories want the mayor to be all powerful in London government. The mayor would be the only person elected by Londoners to do a Londonwide job. Beyond that, the borough leaders would come together to argue from their borough perspectives—nothing wrong with that—in a sort of assembly of 33. That can, and should, happen anyway. I think that there should be and will be meetings between the mayor, the assembly and borough leaders. It is nonsense to think that a meeting of borough leaders should replace a strategic authority. The Conservatives' only other point concerns privatisation of the tube. A manifesto that says only that we should have a mayor but no assembly and privatisation of the tube is thin gruel as an answer to the Government's proposals.

I have worked out that I have three interests to declare. First, I represent a London constituency and, like other London Members, have a constituency interest to represent. Secondly, thanks to Ministers, one of the prospective sites for the Greater London authority is in my constituency. Thirdly, so that the House does not think that I am dissembling, I make it clear that I have a further interest in that I intend in the new year to put my name forward for selection, and possibly therefore election, to the Greater London authority. That is a matter for me, not my party, but I put it on record so that people do not think that I am trying to hide something from the House.

Mr. Wilkinson: In what capacity?

Mr. Hughes: That is not a matter for today. I am trying to make it clear that I have an additional interest in the outcome of the Bill. I hope that that suffices for the time being.

Whatever our different interests in the outcome, we are dealing with a great transformation of government for a huge number of people. The figures are extraordinary. Some 7 million people—more people than in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland—are involved. There are 5 million voters, a work force of more than 3.5 million, and 3 million households. Interestingly, more than one third of those households are people who live alone. That is an important London factor. There are 1 million visitors a day. Interestingly, too, four fifths of the people who come in use public transport. We should never forget that in a city where fewer people have private cars than in other regions of the country.

London already has the best and most comprehensive bus network of any comparable city, and a greater length of tube lines. There is also its wonderful ethnic and linguistic diversity. The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) noted that the city is a hugely successful financial centre, as well as being the third most popular tourist city in the world. That is the great city that we are seeking to give to the authority to deal with.

What we must try to do is make London more than just a great city. We share the Government's objective of wanting London to be an environmentally sustainable city—and one which offers the highest quality of life to those who work here, live here and visit. That is not a description that any of us would argue currently applies to much of Greater London. We want it to be a healthier, safer and more prosperous city, but we agree with the Deputy Prime Minister that better health, improved safety and greater prosperity must be shared more equally. London is a terribly unequal city, as my own constituency illustrates. The gap has widened: the rich are very rich and some of the poor are very poor indeed. If the new London government does one thing only, which is to bring Londoners closer together in their enjoyment of the city's benefits, that will be in everybody's interest. We shall all be judged by the outputs, not by our input into today's debate.

Like the hon. Member for Brent, East, I hope that the Government will trust Londoners with as many decisions as possible. At the end of the day, that is far more democratically safe: it is much safer for the Deputy Prime Minister to give Londoners the power to throw out their government if they do not like them, than it is for him to retain powers to himself and so have to shoulder some of the blame if things go wrong.

My hon. Friends and I share the view of the hon. Member for Brent, East that we have to do something to reduce the relatively unrestricted power of the mayor as proposed. We intend to table an amendment, on which we shall be happy to negotiate, that would provide a power of recall. If, say, 90 per cent. of assembly members passed a motion, they could force the mayor to resign; or if 10 per cent. of Londoners signed a petition, they could trigger a referendum that might force the mayor to resign. I gather that it has been proposed in Japan that, if a mayor's proposal on budgetary matters is not passed, the assembly members can force the mayoral resignation; but that, if they do that, they too have to go back to the polls, which ensures that they do not use their power inappropriately.

I hope that we can have a debate on that subject, because the problem of having an all but all-powerful mayor but no power of recall is not sufficiently answered by being able to vote the mayor out of office every four years. As the citizens of Washington will remember, when a particular mayor is in office, four years can be far too long.

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): They re-elected him.

Mr. Hughes: They did indeed, but for a mayor to conduct his city's affairs from prison is hardly satisfactory.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Mr. Davey) said, the Bill contains a huge number of references to the powers of the Secretary of State—there are more than 250 such references and the Bill has only 270-odd clauses, so there is almost one power per clause.

Mr. Prescott: I must have missed a few.

Mr. Hughes: The Deputy Prime Minister has owned up again—that makes two concessions I pocket. The Deputy Prime Minister has realised that he will still not be powerful enough. I have heard of the all-powerful aspirations of Yorkshiremen, but this is ridiculous—even

[Mr. Hughes]

in Welshmen who are Yorkshiremen by adoption. It is the Liverpudlian extraction that protects him from megalomania.

The crucial clauses are clauses 25 to 36, because they contain the meat of the Bill, dealing with principles and powers, not with structure and policies. They illustrate the accumulation of power that the Bill contains, with the Secretary of State's full knowledge, I am sure. Clause 26(2) states:

"In deciding whether to exercise any of the powers of the Authority . . . a body or person shall have regard to any guidance issued"

by the Secretary of State. Clause 27 starts well, with:

"The Authority shall have the power to anything which the Mayor considers will further the purpose"

of the assembly. However, one then comes to what must be the subsection to reduce the power of the hon. Member for Brent, East, clause 27(10), which states:

"The Secretary of State may by order . . . make further provision for preventing the Authority from doing . . . anything . . . which may be done by a London borough council, the Common Council or a public body"—

that is any public body—

"and . . . which is specified, or is of a description specified, in the order."

As if that were not enough, the final subsection in the clause, subsection (11), states:

"The Secretary of State may by order impose limits on the expenditure which may be incurred by the Authority by virtue of subsection (1) above."

The mayor can have wonderful strategies, but not strategies that are truly her or his own, because clause 33(3) states:

"the Mayor shall have regard to . . . the need to ensure that the strategy is consistent with national policy".

I am happy that the mayor's strategy should have to take account of Government policy, but what is the point of having London regional government if it cannot decide its own strategy where it thinks that the Government's strategy for the whole country is inappropriate for London? If the mayor does not do what she or he should do, clause 36 provides that the Secretary of State

"may direct the Mayor to prepare and publish the strategy within such period as the direction shall specify."

Finally, schedule 13, which was referred to earlier in respect of transport, enables the Secretary of State, in respect of both road charges on users and the non-residential parking place levy, to require the GLA

"to pay a prescribed portion of the net proceeds . . . to the Secretary of State".

So the Secretary of State is going to tell the authority, "You have the power to raise the money, but I'm going to take a whole load back, thank you very much."

Mr. Brake: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that the proceeds of the congestion charges Londoners pay should be spent in Chelsea or Cheam, rather than in Cheltenham or Chester; and that the Bill must be amended so that the Secretary of State is not entitled to a portion of the proceeds of congestion charges?

Mr. Hughes: My hon. Friend has a good point, although the alliteration makes me suspect that he thought of it some moments ago. He is right: Londoners, who will be paying the charges, will expect the money to return to them.

Mr. Prescott: It will.

Mr. Hughes: I am now hearing that it will. Perhaps the Minister for Transport in London will elaborate.

Ms Glenda Jackson: I shall reiterate the position, because either the hon. Gentleman or his hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) was not listening to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. Let me make it abundantly clear: every penny of money that is raised from congestion charging or the non-residential parking place levy will be spent where it is raised for the benefit of transport. There will be costs, but once those costs, which we believe can be kept to the minimum, are covered, every penny raised will be spent where it is raised.

Mr. Hughes: That was clear and I am grateful to the Minister. If that was said before, I accept it. However, in that case, it appears that schedules 13 and 14 are not needed.

Ms Jackson: There will be a 10-year review.

Mr. Hughes: Well, we can return to that point in Committee. If the Minister is right, we accept that. We are happy with a 10-year review, but for the first 10 years, we want the money to go to the citizens of Chelsea and Cheam, to echo my hon. Friend's phrase. If that is the case, we can agree and so save time in Committee. That is the third point I pocket.

Ms Jackson: Let me repeat, yet again, that where the money is raised is undoubtedly where it will be spent.

Mr. Hughes: I hear what the Minister says and I am hopeful that we can agree that the big clawback clauses, which are always written in by civil servants to give big powers to their Ministers, should be done away with. I gather that such powers are called Henry VIII powers, but the Secretary of State is a far slimmer, meaner and leaner man than Henry VIII and I am sure that he does not need such powers as that autocratic monarch had in years gone by.

Sir Sydney Chapman: The hon. Gentleman has a fundamental point. May I draw his attention to schedule 13, paragraph 15(5), which states:

"Any sums received by the Secretary of State . . . shall be paid into the Consolidated Fund."?

Mr. Hughes: As the hon. Gentleman may imagine, I was reading that very paragraph in bed last night. I went to sleep and nearly dreamt about it—although my dreams had nothing to do with Henry VIII.

Mr. Edward Davey: I am grateful for this opportunity to spare the House from having to hear about my hon. Friend's dreams. I refer him to the Minister's comments: she said that money would be spent where it was raised. Does my hon. Friend agree that that interpretation could

be applied to the contributions of those people who travel into London from outlying areas? That would trigger the use of the relevant subsection in schedule 13 and the money could be spent outside London.

Mr. Hughes: We heard the Minister's statement and my hon. Friend has raised a linked question. It may be that we can begin the debate tomorrow if my hon. Friend the Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) catches Madam Speaker's eye. I accept that the issue must be pursued. We are worried that the clauses may be too powerful, and the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) and Conservative spokesmen appear to share our concern. I hope that the drafting will reflect the comments of the Secretary of State and the Minister for Transport in London.

Mr. Prescott: It is in my speech, so read it.

Mr. Hughes: I will pocket a copy of that as well.

There are serious funding concerns. The Government will retain their capping powers—I understand that they will be the latest upgraded Prescott variants on capping. However, if this is to be genuine citywide government, the GLA should be able to set the ceiling and the floor and control the funding from left to right. The authority will have a starting budget of £3 billion, with the power to raise money to increase that sum to £4 billion or £5 billion. There are many detailed financial considerations that we must discuss in Committee. For example, the Government Office for London, which currently has a budget of £1.25 billion, will retain £750 million after the establishment of the GLA. Why does it not have to hand over all of its budgetary powers and responsibilities to London government?

The budget for London transport raises different issues. It appears that, unlike other capital cities, London could be without any national subsidy for its transport system under the new regime in the new millennium. I remember that, when the Secretary of State was the shadow transport spokesman, he regularly reminded the then Government—we believe correctly—that London Transport needed public subsidy. It is worthwhile for the taxpayer to pay for the public transport system because that is in the public's best interest.

It is a nonsense not to allow the people of London to choose how much money should be raised. The Government eventually conceded that power to Scotland—although the Scottish Parliament will not be able to exercise that right for the first two years. The population of London is much bigger than that of Scotland. Although the GLA will not be a national parliament, we must trust Londoners. If they think that more money should be raised—as they did with the "Fares Fair" policy under the GLC—they should vote for it, and the same applies if they want to see less money raised.

In the hours and days ahead, debate will rightly turn to the key issues in the Bill. A sustainable London means a sustainable transport system. I hope that we can agree—I think Ministers are starting in the right place—that we should look first at the pedestrians, then the cyclists, the public transport users, then quasi-public transport such as taxis and the river bus, and finally the cars. We must try to ensure that London works first for those who use the most healthy, cost-effective and least congesting and polluting forms of transport. I hope that we will see integrated ticketing for London river transport. The Secretary of State has been committed to that policy for many years, and I share his objective. I know the difficulties involved, but it would be wonderful if London's public transport system included the river.

There is another issue—to which we shall return—concerning the confusion between borough and London responsibilities regarding roads, particularly trunk roads and some roads out of the city. I will not go into detail now, but we are concerned that that issue has not been thought through and concluded adequately.

I turn finally to policing. Londoners will welcome the fact that, for the first time since the establishment of the Met at the beginning of the last century, London policing will be democratically accountable. At last, London, like the rest of the country, will have democratic policing. I am confident that the police want that also. In that way, democratic participation will address the difficulties of recruitment, racism and inherent prejudice—which is perceived and often real—which still exists in the police force.

Our job is to get a Bill on the statute book. However, the Liberal Democrats also want to ensure that the Greater London authority has real Greater London authority autonomy and ensures greater power for Londoners. We have a suspicion that the control freaks are hanging on on the Government Front Bench, or possibly behind it. We suspect that some people are not yet willing to let Londoners run London. We see our job as speaking up for Londoners so that they may reclaim the power to run this great capital city themselves.

6.25 pm

Ms Joan Ruddock (Lewisham, Deptford): I crave the indulgence of the House: this may not be another nasal contribution, but it will be a throaty one, because of my bad cold.

I came to London from a small town in south Wales to study at Imperial college—then, as now, one of the world's foremost scientific institutions. The college is situated in south Kensington, within strolling distance of the Serpentine and the great green spaces of Hyde park. I found a great and wonderful soaring city at my feet. I had little money and no thoughts of a car, but I went everywhere. I fell in love with Kew gardens, and went to the Proms, the south bank and the ballet. I even stood through "Götterdämmerung" at Covent Garden—although only once.

It was some years later, when I left academia and went to work for Shelter, that I saw the other side of this great city: the appalling overcrowding of families, and the damp and unfit flats and Rachmanite landlords. The injustice and inequality that I saw then led eventually to my being elected as the Member of Parliament for Lewisham, Deptford—the most deprived part of a borough that is the 14th most deprived district in England. First impressions bear out those statistics. There is neglected social fabric: poor environment, poor housing and ill health.

However, we also have a vibrant community, with extraordinary ethnic diversity that is expressed in commerce and culture. We have our own great institutions, such as Goldsmiths, Laban and Lewisham colleges; a community theatre at the Albany; Hales, a superb modern art gallery on Deptford high street; and a

[Ms Joan Ruddock]

variety of artists' studios linked to regeneration initiatives. This is the London we share: a city of great contrasts, marked by extremities of wealth and poverty. It is "a capital divided", as the London Research Centre's study of the same name showed two years ago.

New Labour's manifesto promise to Londoners was to deliver the leadership and infrastructure that would promote the economic, social and environmental well-being of the many, not the few. We are today debating the substance of that promise, and I congratulate my right hon. and hon. Friends on bringing it to fruition. I cannot speak comprehensively in the time available, but, like other hon. Members, I shall touch upon a few issues.

The first issue is the mayor. I have no doubt that the mayor's success will lie in the quality of leadership that he or she brings to the job: the ability to inspire confidence and pull together all the key players—or possibly warring factions—who can provide the dynamic leadership and partnerships necessary to deliver strategic policies. There is already considerable consensus about the Government's plans, as witnessed by the many organisations that have written letters of support to London Members of Parliament.

The mayor will also need to listen carefully to ordinary people. The most recent picture of London opinion was provided by a Mori poll on the health of Londoners commissioned by the King's Fund and the *Evening Standard*. The findings certainly present a challenge. Three out of five Londoners think that our city is an unhealthy place to live, and half think that the situation is getting worse.

When asked in the survey what the London mayor's top priorities should be in solving the problems associated with ill health, nine out of 10 people opted for environmental issues, including traffic reduction and improving air quality. Not surprisingly, other top priorities included work opportunities and life-style issues, such as child care and tackling drugs.

The poll clearly tells us that the quality of the environment and people's health are no longer subjects for expert epidemiologists but matters of common public perception. As with everything else in London, there are enormous inequalities in access to health services. I believe that the mayor's role must be clarified and strengthened in relation to the health of Londoners. I trust that my right hon. Friend will revisit the proposals advanced by the King's Fund—particularly the case for a public health unit to inform the mayor's policy agenda.

I turn now to transport, wherein lie Londoners' greatest hopes and fears. Seven years ago, as shadow Minister for Transport in a team headed by my right hon. Friend, I wrote our first transport strategy for London. It has stood the test of time. We said then:

"We will link land use and transport planning to provide greater access at lower environmental costs. We will set higher standards for every aspect of public transport and maximise the integration of different modes to make easier, more pleasant and reliable travel. We aim to create greater fairness in that the needs of women and those with disabilities are better met."

The mayor and assembly of London must rise to that challenge. Nationally, the Government have already laid down a template in the integrated transport strategy White Paper, and every Londoner could suggest changes that would make a difference. Often, the decision to run a car in London is based not on the need to commute to work but on the need to travel to leisure and other public services and facilities.

We know from survey after survey that women are especially concerned about their personal security on public transport. Even as someone who is not afraid to travel on public transport in London at night, I recognise the intimidating environment that is presented by deserted, poorly lit stations, tube trains ankle-deep in rubbish, and frequent, unchallenged anti-social behaviour by other passengers.

There has to be a case for more staff outside rush hours, and more attention to passenger comfort and convenience. A strategic view demands proper integration of all modes and ticketing policies that assist and encourage people to travel on public transport, rather than defeating them at every turn. One has only to consider what has happened at Paddington since the setting up of the non-integrated Heathrow express and the chaos created as people leave that train to get tickets to other destinations. Today, it is nobody's job to deal with such problems; tomorrow, it will be the mayor's job.

The need to discourage car use and expand public transport capacity is now a matter of consensus among opinion formers, but if we are not to disable the mayor from the outset, we must ensure that a central strategy can work. There has to be money to expand capacity ahead of punitive measures. Buses are, of course, the quickest answer. A strategic network with draconian powers for policing bus lanes and green, clean, low-floor buses will go a long way to creating alternatives to the private car. I make a plea for better standards of driving of those important London buses.

No mayor worthy of the job will countenance any of the moneys raised from congestion charging—which, of course, we all support—going to anything but public transport. I am grateful for the guarantees that Ministers have given Londoners today.

Mobility is central to London's economy, and it is appropriate that the mayor should establish the new bodies and appoint the members of the new transport authority for London and the London development agency. The task of the mayor and the assembly will be informed by the recently published comprehensive blueprint for economic regeneration, "The London Study", which was led by the Association of London Government, and the first report of the London Development Partnership. Those studies embrace the realities of modern city living, counting the economic, social and environmental costs of urban growth. They argue that the key to solving the problems identified lies in adopting a model of sustainable development.

In that model, three policy areas—economy, environment and equity—are given equal and overlapping status. Many of us have argued for that for a very long time. We all know of the tensions that exist between economic development, social cohesion and environmental protection, and nowhere more so than in London. The mayor's greatest challenge will be to lead and foster the negotiated partnerships through which strategic success can be delivered.

Londoners have fallen behind in the modern labour market, which is often not recognised in the House. As the London Development Partnership report points out,

unemployment here is second only to that in Merseyside, and considerably above the rate for Wales, for Scotland and for the UK as a whole. Almost half the country's ethnic minority communities live in London, and suffer disproportionately from unemployment. That is a huge challenge, and an opportunity.

London must get its fair share of the spending rounds and regeneration funding. Our small businesses need better support, not only for start-ups but through the continuing commercial life cycle.

The community and voluntary sectors also need better recognition of their enormous contribution, and the way in which they are rapidly adding to our sum of economic regeneration. Of course, our economy is rooted in the service industries and tourism, which offer the mayor a potentially huge—and probably very enjoyable—role as an ambassador for London.

Surely, if we are to promote the delights of our great cultural centre, the time has come to follow the examples of our competitor cities in other parts of Europe and pedestrianise our central areas.

As well as direct and indirect powers, the mayor will have the opportunity to produce strategies on biodiversity, waste, air quality, noise and culture. Although a number of bodies, such as the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the London Wildlife Trust, welcome the Bill, they have expressed concerns that I share and seek to raise today. The mayor's strategy will set an important precedent for the statutory basis of local biodiversity plans, but it will be important for the mayor to be able to take action to help to deliver the measures agreed in the plans.

Excellent work is already under way in a partnership of environmental bodies working in London on biodiversity. The London Wildlife Trust, of which I am pleased to be a member, has set up the first biological database, which will inform the process. It is now widely recognised that biodiversity is the best indicator of our natural environment, and its incorporation into strategic planning in London is crucial.

I want to touch on the important extension of democracy that the Bill represents. As my hon. Friends have said, for far too long, London's services have been run in an unaccountable way. The new strategic bodies—the London transport authority, the London development agency, the metropolitan police authority and the fire and emergency planning authority—will counter that lack of democracy.

Like most other commentators, I warmly welcome the new openness and accountability in the proposals for mayoral reports, the debate on the state of London and people's question time. The only discordant note that I have received came from the London Voluntary Service Council. It is not opposed to those measures—quite the contrary—but it wants the voluntary sector to be more closely involved and consulted. I am sure that it is right—the sector's contribution to London life is extremely important, and I hope that Ministers will return to that issue, and consult further on it. I thought that the proposal for a civic forum, which was flagged up in the White Paper, was excellent.

On a completely unrelated point, will the Minister reassure us that the new London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority will be able effectively to co-ordinate with the London ambulance service, which remains outside its remit?

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State said at the start of the debate, policing will be dealt with tomorrow. Suffice it to say that crime remains at the top of most Londoners' agenda. Thankfully, crime is falling, and is being substantially addressed by the Government's national plans for partnerships to reduce crime and ensure local safety.

Intelligence-based policing and local partnerships are clearly the way forward, but in London, as others have warned, the greatest challenge lies in restoring and retaining public confidence in the police. Without it, no strategy can move forward at the rate we need. London's population is now one quarter non-white and, as the Stephen Lawrence inquiry has shown, Londoners of good will, black and white, want racism in the Met stamped out once and for all.

I regard it as a privilege to have taken part in this debate on behalf of my constituents and, indeed, the people of London. London is indeed a great city, but it has been slipping behind in many respects. Our task will be not only to modernise the city, its institutions and its governance, but to prepare it for the future and take it into the 21st century.

Clearly, the mayor of London will be a very special and busy woman or man, but, whoever is elected, he or she will be entering that great new office with the enormous hopes of all Londoners riding on him or her and on the new assembly—hopes that they will deliver to us the great world city that London should be, and, at the same time, a better quality of life for the people of London.

6.41 pm

Sir Sydney Chapman (Chipping Barnet): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock). I hope that she will not be embarrassed if I say that my only disappointment is that we no longer hear her from the Government Front Bench.

I was also interested to hear the contribution of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). He prayed in aid the Marquis of Salisbury, who was the Prime Minister at the turn of the century and who, unknown to me, tried to finish off the old London county council. I can only say that my view of the Cecil family has undergone a dramatic change in the past few weeks.

The Greater London Authority Bill is a very important and very long Bill. It has 277 clauses, 243 pages and 21 schedules. Obviously, it will take a little time to go through it clause by clause, line by line and word by word in Committee. In light of what the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, it might be helpful if I make a public declaration here and now to the effect that I have absolutely no intention of standing as mayor or for membership of the assembly. When the House has heard my contribution, it will understand why, and doubtless greet it with a great sigh of relief.

I regretted the fact that the referendum consisted of only one question. I accept that 72 per cent. of the people who took part voted for a mayor and an assembly. My party voted yes, but we wanted a mayor and not an assembly. I think I am right in saying that the Liberal Democrats wanted the assembly but not the mayor. We have to look to the future now, and accept that we have to make the mayor and the assembly work, but I think

[Sir Sydney Chapman]

that it was a mistake for the Government to insist on just one question. They could proceed with much greater confidence had there been separate questions, but that is all in the past.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) that the assembly should be informal, and have the minimum necessary powers. It is important that the mayor has direct contact with the 32 boroughs. I accept that he will, but it would be better if the assembly contained one representative from each borough, preferably the leader, and, of course, the City of London. We are introducing into the governance of London not only a mayor and an assembly but the London development agency on top of the existing unitary boroughs. We are also keeping the Government Office for London. If we are not careful, the governance of London will be suffocated.

I have not read every word of the Bill, but I have read most of it. Ministers might call me to account, but my impression is that it will encourage bureaucracy, sow confusion in the minds of Londoners as to which body has which powers, and cause dissension between the assembly and the mayor. The assembly and the mayor will both argue that they have been directly elected, and will seek ever more powers. Empire building is inevitable, no matter how hard the Government try to control it with legislation. I am absolutely convinced that the result will be an unnecessarily costly exercise, which will take powers and influence away from the London boroughs.

We can have differences of opinion about this, but since the abolition of the Greater London council in 1986 and of the Inner London education authority in 1990, the governance of London has come closer to its people through being managed by the boroughs.

It is all very well for hon. Members to say that there is an overwhelming wish for a Greater London body to be re-established—I am not making a party political point, as abolition took place under the Conservative party—but had my constituents been asked way back in the 1960s whether they wanted to leave Hertfordshire and join Greater London, I know what 95 per cent. of them would have said. However, the compensation of joining London—or one of the compensations, as there may have been a few—was that education moved nearer to the town hall. The town hall, although it was in Hendon rather than Barnet, was nearer to the people of Barnet than was Hertfordshire's county hall. There were pluses and minuses.

Given the resolution of the people of London to have a mayor and an assembly, we want to ensure that both work in the most cost-efficient, fair and effective way possible. The Secretary of State referred to the successes of London. Those successes have increased rather than diminished in recent years. I know that the hon. Member for Deptford, like all hon. Members, cares deeply about the terrible social problems in our capital city. I share that concern and the resolve to do something about them, but I do not think that the creation of a new tier of government will necessarily solve them.

I stand to be corrected, but I do not think that the White Paper, which was published just before the referendum—I was grateful for that—made it clear that the authority would have powers to impose new taxes on motorists. I remember warning that the referendum should take place after the Bill had been passed, so that Londoners would know exactly what they were voting for.

I said that Green Papers can be quite different from White Papers, that White Papers can be different from Bills, and that Bills can be different from Acts of Parliament. I remember likening White Papers to bikinis—what they reveal is interesting, but what they conceal can be vital. Some of my constituents will feel slightly aggrieved that the Government did not, as it were, come clean on their desire to give the authority the power to impose new taxes on motorists, a measure included in the Bill.

The White Paper claimed that the Government themselves would meet most of the cost of running the Greater London assembly and the office of mayor through grant. I am aware that 80 per cent. of the expenditure on local authorities' responsibilities in the capital is met by revenue support grant or by the taxpayer rather than the council tax payer. I believe that more funding of the new structure will have to come from Londoners, which gives me the gravest suspicions.

The Government claim that the Greater London authority will simply assume responsibility for the present £3.3 billion expenditure a year. They calculate that the administrative cost of setting up the assembly and the mayor will be about £20 million. I doubt that; I shall be interested to see the administrative cost for the first year. I wager that, whatever it is, it will be more than £20 million. It will have doubled in five years.

I have seen such things happen in the Council of Europe and the Western European Union. Once such a body—doing wonderful work, I am sure—is created, there is an impelling imperative to find more work. The functions—if not the powers—of the assembly are comprehensive. I draw hon. Members' attention to clause 14. So far as I can make out, the assembly has the right to investigate and report on virtually anything. It will take that opportunity. Hon. Members may say that that is a good thing, but I am not so sure. Such a power will create an overweening bureaucracy, which will be very costly.

The Deputy Prime Minister kindly allowed me to intervene on the subject of planning. I declare a possible interest. For many years, I have been a non-practising chartered town and country planner, and I am a fellow of the Royal Town Planning Institute. I mention that because, for the first time, I have heard the phrase "spatial development strategy", which will become the responsibility of the mayor.

I note that London boroughs' unitary development plans will be required to conform with that strategy. Although I have no objection to that in principle—it seems eminently sensible in principle—I think that, in practice, at least some London boroughs, including mine, might be concerned. Barnet was the first London borough to put into practice its unitary development plan, which is coming up for renewal. There might be a problem fitting in such a revision and renewal when the mayor introduces his spatial development strategy.

Will the Minister say whether applicants and appellants under the development control system will retain the same rights, especially those of appeal to the Secretary of State, once the mayor has the right to direct a London borough—the local planning authority—to refuse an application? I, personally, would like the Secretary of

State's power to be retained, and the mayor not to be given such a power to direct. I firmly believe that such matters require co-operation between the Secretary of State and the local planning authority. As the mayor will appoint members of the planning committee and the London development agency, it is important that there should be no conflict of interest.

Mr. Burstow: The hon. Gentleman is raising a very important point about the relationship between the boroughs and the GLA. Does he share my concern that, if the mayor directs an authority to refuse planning permission, costs might be imposed on the authority following an appeal, which would not have been imposed if it had taken a different decision unfettered by the mayor?

Sir Sydney Chapman: That is a possibility. Such balances must be weighed up. As the Secretary of State already has call-in powers for any significant planning application, I do not see the need for the mayor to intervene.

Ms Glenda Jackson: Perhaps it would be helpful and put the hon. Gentleman out of his misery if I reassured him that appellant rights will indeed still rest with the Secretary of State.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I am very grateful to the Minister for that. It clears up a substantial point, but lays even greater stress on whether the mayor should have such powers.

Detailed points are, of course, for the Committee, but I want to raise one or two in order to discover whether they find any echo in the Chamber. First, under clause 40, it is proposed that a people's question time will be held twice every financial year, which any member of the public will be entitled to attend. I am interested to know where it will be held. Perhaps more importantly, I note that the mayor and the assembly are required to be present at the question time and the people's debate, which is another special event. What will happen if one of the 25 assembly men or women is ill or unavoidably detained? That is a small but important point.

Secondly, under clause 19, it seems that virtually anybody can be mayor. Having considered the clause carefully, I reckon that any hon. Member, even among those who represent constituencies in Northern Ireland, Scotland or Wales—let alone the rest of England—qualifies. I do not know whether you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, will stand, but you have the right to do so under the proposed terms. Are paragraphs (a), (b) and (c) necessary? Instead of stipulating qualifications of age, country and nationality, it would surely suffice that any person who is entitled to vote and on the electoral register in the Greater London area is eligible.

I turn to a point on which the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey allowed me to intervene: schedule 13. It is quite wrong that it specifically requires an authority to pay a prescribed proportion of the net proceeds from motoring charges to the Secretary of State. The schedule states:

"Any sums received by the Secretary of State . . . shall be paid into the Consolidated Fund."

That puts at risk the certainty of the Deputy Prime Minister's promise that all funds would be hypothecated into transport expenditure.

Ms Jackson: I reiterate what I said to the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes): moneys raised will in their entirety be used as part of the mayor's transport strategy.

Sir Sydney Chapman: It is not that I do not want to trust the Minister; we work together in north London on many things. However, given her answer, paragraph 15(5) of schedule 13 is totally unnecessary. We shall address that point in Committee.

When the Greater London council was abolished in 1986, the *Evening Standard* highlighted

"Five years of futile extravagance and irrelevant politicking".

My fear is that the Greater London assembly will lead to the sort of problems too many Londoners experienced under the GLC. I fear that it will lead to unnecessary bureaucracy, confusion, dissension, duplication, waste, and, most certainly, increased taxation for Londoners.

6.59 pm

Ms Linda Perham (Ilford, North): I speak as a native Londoner who represents the London constituency in which I have lived for 25 years. As a former London borough councillor, the first Labour woman mayor of the London borough of Redbridge and a former officer of the Greater London council's department of planning and transportation, I welcome with pride and delight the Second Reading of this Bill, as part of the process of fulfilling Labour's manifesto commitment to restore a strategic authority to the people of London. "Strategic" is the key word. Overall direction is vital to the efficient governance of the greatest city in the world, but it has been sadly lacking in the past 12 years of democratic deficit in our capital city.

Like other hon. Members, I find much in the Bill that I should like to comment on, but—partly because I served on my local council as chair of the leisure committee and the highways committee—I shall focus on aspects of the cultural and transport strategies and leave other detail to other hon. Members.

First, as a professional librarian and chair of the newly formed all-party group on libraries, I welcome the proposal to create a cultural strategy for London, and I welcome the fact that library services are to be part of the remit of the cultural strategy group. I am sure that the Library Association—the professional association that represents all types of libraries—will be pleased to work with the cultural strategy group, and that it will be represented on the group.

A report commissioned by the former Department of National Heritage—"London: Library City", published in 1996 by Comedia—described London as the library capital of the world. The capital has a vast wealth of library resources of all types—public, academic, voluntary, commercial and professional, from the smallest workplace library to the British Library, now in its new building at St. Pancras. The Comedia report suggests that those resources are not well known or widely used by Londoners. Moreover, in some respects, public library provision across the capital amounts to less than the sum of its parts, as each borough plans its service with little reference to its neighbour's or London's overall needs.

[Ms Linda Perham]

I hope that the mayor's cultural strategy will include a vision of library resources throughout London. The cultural strategy group could help to co-ordinate services to contribute to the Greater London authority's aims of promoting economic and social development in Greater London, to ensure equity of access and to exploit opportunities for resource sharing in order to make best use of limited resources.

The Government have pledged to modernise the delivery of services and information, and aim to provide 25 per cent. of their services electronically by 2002. The GLA, as a new authority, should be encouraged to embrace that concept from the outset. It should look to make its policy documents and services available throughout the public library network that is to be developed under the leadership of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. Public libraries, and the new public library network in particular, could ensure that all Londoners have access to the deliberations of their authority, and provide a way to open the GLA to participation and scrutiny.

As a former information officer in the GLC research library, I welcome the recognition of the role of the London Research Centre in the new GLA. The research library that forms part of the centre has an enviable record in the information that it provides to support London boroughs. In its former role as the GLC research library, it also provided support to elected members and departments of the council. Members of the assembly, the mayor, the staff of the GLA and all the agencies associated with it will need accurate and timely information to contribute effectively to the development of London. The research library offers an admirable base on which to build the information infrastructure that will be required by the new authority.

I little thought, when I worked on supplying information to GLC officers and members more than a quarter of a century ago, that I would one day look up at my fifth floor window in County hall from the Terrace of the House of Commons—or that, sadly, 25 years later, I would be contemplating a visit to that beautiful and elegant building, paid for by the people of London, and the home of London government for decades, only to see an aquarium.

Secondly, I unreservedly welcome the establishment of Transport for London, which will provide a centralised resource with control of Londoners' transport needs, and make an essential contribution to the integrated transport system that our capital city so obviously requires.

I am sure that the Minister will not be surprised when I mention taxis. As she knows, taxis are a key component filling the gap between London's different forms of transport provision. As many hon. Members know, my constituency is renowned for the number of licensed taxi drivers who live in the area. A former taxi driver, my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford), is sitting behind me. I hope that I shall not say anything that he had intended to say; plenty of people have done that to me in the past.

I was pleased that the taxi was included as part of the proposed integrated transport system in the White Paper this year. As we know, taxis are an important part of London's transport planning, and a vital means of linking transport termini.

I am pleased that, in the Bill, the regulation of London's taxis—and of private hire vehicles, whose licensing reached the statute book earlier in the year, following a campaign by hon. Members, including me—is to be transferred from the Metropolitan police to Transport for London. That will ensure that the taxi fleet is managed as part of London's wider public transport strategy.

Taxis provide Londoners and millions of visitors with a safe, efficient and reliable service, and it is especially important that taxis should have access to ranks at railway stations. That is at the heart of an integrated service for London's travelling public.

I urge the Minister to consider incorporating in clause 176 provision enabling a driver to designate his cab as either smoking or non-smoking. Currently, a driver can only request that a passenger not smoke, and that can, naturally, lead to a driver being required to carry passengers who insist on smoking. Obviously, that is a threat to drivers' health. A change to the legislation would closely fit the Government's wider policy on smoking.

I also hope that the Minister will consider introducing the necessary wording to enable an administrative charge to be introduced for "the knowledge". At present, it is not possible to charge knowledge applicants for the resources that they use. All testing costs—including those of examiners, syllabuses, administration and testing—are met through the driver's annual licence fee. The Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998 allows minicab applicants to be charged for their tests; the same principles should apply to licensed taxi driver applicants.

I can think of no other industry where the examination of applicants or trainees is entirely subsidised by that industry's qualified professionals. What happens is equivalent to the driving test being completely subsidised by the road tax. The current situation also hampers the development of more modern procedures, as the Public Carriage Office does not have the necessary revenue to update testing processes. The proposed change would also be popular with licensed drivers, as their licence fee would be reduced. That is another change that I believe that the Minister is on record as having supported; I hope that an opportunity will be found in the Bill to update an obvious anomaly.

I briefly mention the danger that private hire vehicle drivers will register their vehicles as public service vehicles under the Public Passenger Vehicles Act 1981. I am aware that that is occurring in places outside London, including Southend. That practice enables drivers to circumvent checks on their criminal record, health, vehicles and topographical training. Given recent reports of further assaults by minicab drivers on women, that may form a dangerous loophole in the law.

The Bill also passes responsibility for public service vehicles to Transport for London. I hope that, in co-ordinating the granting of such licences, TFL will ensure that the hard work that went into protecting public safety by passing the Public Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998 is not lost.

A modern and efficient taxi service plays a core role in a modern and efficient London. The Bill, by creating a mayor, an Assembly and Transport for London, will go a long way to establish the necessary direction and long awaited strategic planning that our capital city so badly needs.

Lastly, the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) said that he might like the leaders of London borough councils to be members of the assembly, or to represent the assembly. I should have thought that leaders had enough to do; and if the Conservative amendment were successful, there would be 33, not 25, members to be paid, thereby increasing costs.

7.9 pm

Mr. John Wilkinson (Ruislip–Northwood): I declare an interest, although it is not in any sense remunerated. I am the elected president of the London Green Belt Council, which as hon. Members know exists to represent the interests of varied groups all around and within Greater London, to ensure that its beautiful green belt spaces are preserved.

The Secretary of State said at the outset that the Bill would produce a measure offering greater power to the people of London. I wish that it were so. I am delighted that Opposition Front Benchers have supported in principle the establishment of a voice for London, but that voice should be as democratic as possible. To me, this is the starting point, and it is the fundamental principle upon which I diverge from the Government. I voted against the abolition of the Greater London council because the then Conservative Government, whom I supported, did not offer a residual, slimmed-down strategic authority for London which could speak for the capital's interests within London, and to Government and in the councils of the nation as a whole. That, however, is for the history books.

We must address a most interesting measure. The hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) has much experience in these matters and, as usual, he made an original, interesting and relevant speech. He described the Bill as "a package of powers leading to regional government for England." I do not share those wider objectives but the Bill has some features that are common to the prototypes of regional government which we have established both in Wales and Scotland—most particularly, the method of election for the assembly men.

I earnestly wish that the assembly were drawn up of elected representatives from each borough. Opposition Front Benchers, quite reasonably and with much cogent force, argue for those representatives to be the borough leaders. I do not believe that borough leaders should be diverted from their primary task, which is the leadership of their boroughs. To me, that is a full enough occupation, and I think that any ancillary work would be more than most borough leaders could reasonably be asked to fulfil. They are not even fully paid professionals. Many of them have other occupations, and I do not think that it would be sensible to expect them to travel backwards and forwards to central London to fulfil their obligations as assembly men as well as borough leaders. However, I recognise that my view is a personal one.

I shall argue this through if I am fortunate enough to be selected as a member of the Standing Committee. I spent long enough in the Royal Air Force to know that one should never volunteer, but like the hon. Member for Brent, East, I do volunteer. It should be a most interesting Bill to consider in Committee. As we discovered so often during extremely entertaining speeches when considering the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill of 1997, the devil will be in the detail.

I asked the Secretary of State, quite specifically, what the formula was for the election of closed-list assembly men. They are the minority of 11, but an important 11. Those 11 people will be in the privileged position of having no constituents. They will not have as much work to do as the others but they will probably have the same salary. They will not have the onerous constituency responsibilities—they will be mega-constituencies—as the other 14 assembly men.

I asked the Secretary of State what the electoral formula would be. The right hon. Gentleman did not know. At least, he could not describe its operation. It is the familiar d'Hondt formula. I do not really understand it but I hoped for some instruction from the right hon. Gentleman. I thought that the payroll was paid to fulfil an educational function of that kind. However, if the Secretary of State cannot understand the formula, how is the average Londoner to comprehend it? To revert to the question of democracy, I think that a comprehensible electoral system is fundamental to any credible electoral process.

The constituencies will be mega-constituencies of two or more boroughs. I do not think that that is right. Directly elected Members of the European Parliament showed us what that tended to mean. The average elector saw little of his Euro Member. Following the precedent that some colleagues on the assembly will not have constituencies, I suspect that we shall see little even of our constituency assembly men.

I shall take a parochial view. We all do so because it is the way in which we judge most political processes. In Hillingdon, we shall be linked with Ealing. Hillingdon and Ealing do not have much in common apart from the fact that they are contiguous. However, Hillingdon is equally contiguous with Harrow in the north and with Hounslow in the south. I suppose that the compromise was to choose Ealing in the middle. That does not especially satisfy my constituents in Ruislip-Northwood. It may not—I hate to presume this—please the constituents of the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) in the south. Apart from being a compromise, I do not see what there is in the linkage for the residents of Hillingdon.

In democratic terms, I think that the assembly will be a step backwards from the old Greater London council. The GLC was a much more democratic body. There was one member for each parliamentary constituency. We usually came to know very well our local GLC representative. Ruislip-Northwood had a most distinguished GLC member. Indeed, Sir Cyril Taylor went on to become sheriff of Greater London. Many constituencies formed a close individual link with their Greater London council members.

Again, to take the parochial perspective which I think is typical among the electorate, it is important that there should be someone elected for Hillingdon. After all, Hillingdon has London Airport; and in the Harefield ward, which is in my constituency, it has probably the greatest expanse of green belt in the whole of London. In area, the Harefield ward is as large as the borough of Islington. It has most of what is left of rural Middlesex.

Under the proposed system of election, there is no guarantee whatever that we shall have any representative with a particular understanding, first, of air transport matters, which are so important to those who live round Heathrow and derive their livelihood from the airport.

[Mr. John Wilkinson]

Secondly, there is no guarantee that the area will be represented by someone who has any specific understanding of rural and green-belt issues, which are so important to my constituents in Harefield. That, then, is the problem with the assembly.

What about the mayor? I am probably very old fashioned but I suspect that the electorate understands what I am saying. I prefer first past the post. I do not like any jiggery-pokery with the figures once the votes are cast. The person who receives the most votes should be elected. I cannot see the merit in the supplementary vote system whereby the second preferences of those who are eliminated because they happen to have done worst—not first or second—count more than the second preferences of those who came first or second. That does not seem logical to me. If it is not logical to me, I doubt whether it will be logical to most of London's electors.

Mr. Gapes: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that in an election with six, seven or 10 candidates conducted under a first-past-the-post system there is the dangerous possibility of an extremist racist candidate winning with perhaps 20 per cent. of the vote? A supplementary vote would guarantee that such extremists would not win.

Mr. Wilkinson: Again, I am old-fashioned. I believe in the wisdom of Londoners to choose an appropriate person for the job. It is fundamental that we should trust the electors to exercise their discretion. I imagine that the hon. Gentleman's reasoning lay behind the Secretary of State's stipulation that there should be a threshold of 5 per cent. of the vote below which a candidate could not be returned to the assembly.

I do not accept the hon. Gentleman's point, except to the extent that it reinforces my argument with the hon. Member for Brent, East that the mayor, once elected, should be accountable. He will have huge powers of patronage over bodies such as the London development agency and the transport body for London. Offices of the greatest importance will be within his patronage. He should be checked and scrutinised and should be removable from office by a majority vote of the assembly. Co-operation and effective collaboration between the mayor and the assembly will be central to the efficacy of the Greater London authority. Londoners need to know that a mayor who misbehaves because he is racist, corrupt, lazy or inefficient can be removed easily.

The reasoned amendment so wisely drafted by my right hon. Friends also mentions the effects on transport in London. The transport functions of the authority are probably of most interest to Londoners. We all suffer from traffic congestion and the difficulties of public transport. I deeply regret the fact that the Secretary of State has not made more progress with the reform of the London Underground.

We are told that the tender process for the three infrastructure companies may not be completed until 2000. That is a long time for the bids to be open. In most commercial tenders there would be a much shorter period. Judging from the Labour party's manifesto for London, Londoners would have expected the Government to have in place by now—or, if we are being very generous, at least by the end of this year—a new system for running transport in London effectively.

I fear that there is potential for conflict between the mayoralty, with its overall responsibility for public transport in London, and commercial enterprises that have invested good money on behalf of their shareholders in the 30-year leases for the infrastructure companies. If there is too much political interference from the Greater London authority—or even a fear of such interference—the investment that the Government are hoping for will not be forthcoming.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) wisely pointed out, it is verging on the unethical for the Government to insert proposals on congestion charging and parking levies at places of work when those issues did not feature in the White Paper and were therefore not put to the electorate in the referendum campaign. They are more taxes on London.

Mr. Raynsford: I would not want the hon. Gentleman to mislead the House, even unintentionally. The White Paper made it clear that the Government were considering congestion charging and non-residential parking charging. A decision was deferred until publication of the subsequent transport White Paper. The issue was raised in the London White Paper and Londoners were aware of it.

Mr. Wilkinson: I am grateful to the Minister for that, but I am afraid that it does not exonerate the Government from my charge. A consideration of a matter is different from specific proposals. That bears out the argument of many Conservative Members that it would have been more honest of the Government to put to Londoners a post-legislative referendum, allowing them to judge exactly what the powers of the authority would be and how they would impinge on life in London.

I fear that the effect of congestion charging will be negative on outer London. Motorists will come to the end of the tube line and leave their cars there, not wanting to pay the congestion charge. The congestion will be transferred from inner London to outer London, where traffic is already diabolical. I suspect that it will be made worse. The proposal will penalise those who take the trouble to get in their cars and go to work. Very often they do so for good economic or practical reasons. The idea will cause problems.

A levy on parking spaces is also proposed. Employers are doing more than enough by providing work. They have to make pay-as-you-earn contributions, they have to pay business rates, they have to pay national insurance contributions and now employers in London will have to pay a levy for giving employment. That will make them less competitive and less likely to take on workers. The effect will therefore be negative.

The Bill needs to be scrutinised with the utmost care in Committee. Like the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), I am glad that the authority will not become operational until the spring or summer of 2000. We need a careful scrutiny process in both Chambers. We shall need to select candidates for the mayoralty with the greatest care. We do not want people who are in it for an ego trip or for self-publicity. The job will require qualities of the highest order to co-operate with the assembly and work together effectively. That will not necessarily be achieved by someone seeking a high profile for themselves.

The Liberal Democrats suggest that we use the intervening time for a Special Standing Committee. I chaired the Special Standing Committee on the Armed

Forces Bill. Even that fairly modest measure took days and days in Special Standing Committee. They do not even propose an open-minded Committee. The beauty of the Special Standing Committee system is that it takes as wide a spectrum of interested and informed opinion as possible so that it can come to the appropriate conclusions before the Standing Committee sits. The Liberal Democrats are suggesting what such a Special Standing Committee should do. Their instruction talks about the Greater London authority being

"declared the regional government for Greater London"

and having the power to conduct referendums. It would have tax-varying powers, and the ability

"to transfer powers between the Mayor and the Assembly".

Those are all issues of such magnitude that they could sensibly be discussed and approved only by the House.

The Liberal instruction goes on to discuss

"the establishment of parish and community councils in Greater London"—

I would argue that exactly the same applies—and also says that the Greater London authority could have a role in overseeing health and further education services.

The last two might have merits. We are bruised in our part of London because two of our leading hospitals—Mount Vernon and Harefield—are under threat, but health service issues could not be dealt with by a strategic authority for London without proper borough representatives. Most people are worried about their local hospital, the particular services that it supplies, and the particular features of their locality.

Like my party's Front Benchers, I support the measure and the mayoralty, but I do not support the system of elections that has been chosen. I should like there to be directly elected representatives from each borough, and I hope that the Bill receives the thorough scrutiny in Committee that it deserves.

7.31 pm

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): I also declare an interest as a candidate—not for mayor or for the assembly, but for the Standing Committee. I urge the Whips to use the d'Hondt mechanism for selecting its members, because on that basis I may stand a chance of getting on to it.

It is 12 years since the abolition of the Greater London council, and I greatly welcome this excellent Bill. It will restore democratic strategic government to our city, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on his strength of commitment to our capital city in securing parliamentary time, as a priority, to get the Bill through. I also thank my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction, for the dedication, expertise and professionalism that he has shown in the drafting of the White Paper and for this mammoth Bill.

I read an article at the weekend about the need to return to the fashion for erecting statues to national and local figures. After reading the Bill, my hon. Friend has my support for being shaped in concrete—*[Laughter.]* My hon. Friend should be shaped in stone.

I do not want to dwell on the past, but it has been somewhat unseemly not to have had at least one word of apology or regret from Conservative Members for the past decade, in which London has been left bereft of democratic leadership. It is disheartening that any repentance, even at this late stage, appears to be too much to ask from them.

Whatever one thought of the GLC—many of us had immense criticisms of its structure and role—surely political wisdom dictated reform rather than abolition. Indeed, in the early 1980s there was cross-party support at county hall, and in some parts of the House, as the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) said, for reform to establish a streamlined structure, some of which is in the Bill. The Bill will right the wrong of abolition, but in considering it we have to address the question whether it will achieve a reformed authority that will prove effective in representing and forwarding the interests of Londoners.

There are five tests of any democratic body. First, does the authority have clear and suitable objectives? Secondly, does it have sufficient powers to achieve those objectives? Thirdly, is its structure and organisation capable of delivering its goals? Fourthly, can it secure the resources that it needs to fulfil its role? Fifthly, will it command sufficient popular support, democratic involvement and participation to stand the test of time?

On the first test, the objectives of the new authority are set out at clause 25, which states:

"The Authority shall have the purpose of promoting economic and social development in Greater London and the improvement of the environment in Greater London."

It goes on to emphasise economic development, social development, sustainable development, the creation of wealth and improvements in the health of Londoners as key objectives.

The Bill represents a written constitution for the strategic governance of our city. Although I did not expect literary artistry in the drafting of that essential clause—or calls for liberté, égalité and fraternité—we could have been slightly more forthcoming to make explicit the positive role and duty of the new government for our city. We should set out clearly as our authority's objective the securing of the well-being of Londoners and the enhancement of the quality of life in the capital. Drawing on the White Paper to redraft that clause would give more definition to the dynamic and beneficial role that we expect the new authority to play.

I appreciate that much of the inspirational detail of the objectives, role and policies of the new body will be derived from the individual policy strategies which are to be drafted by the mayor. Surely in that key clause, however, there should be more specific reference to the vital role that the authority will play in promoting social cohesion, securing community safety, tackling poverty, achieving greater equality and tackling discrimination in any form.

In addition, a significant omission in the list of strategies for which the mayor has been given development responsibility—at clause 33—is that no specific duty is placed on the mayor to develop strategies of that sort. I am also anxious that a general duty has been placed on the authority to ensure reasonable balance between promoting economic, social and environmental development. My anxiety is not about the spirit of that proposal, but about its prospective implementation, which appears to open up a vista of litigation from individual London boroughs and ratepayers and hamstring the new authority's activities.

[Mr. John McDonnell]

On the question whether the new body has sufficient powers to achieve its objectives, I am pleased that it has not only been given a wide breadth of responsibilities, but that a range of explicit powers of direction are linked to those responsibilities.

There are, however, two areas of concern. They stem from threats from above and below. From above, I am extremely concerned that clarity should be achieved on the role of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to intervene in the policies and operation of the Greater London authority.

London First, a business organisation for London, has identified 30 examples of where the Secretary of State can exercise power over the new authority and has expressed concern that they range from fundamental controls over budget setting and policy development to relatively minor issues such as approving the penalties for parking on strategic roads.

My right hon. Friend has a sweeping power under the Bill to issue guidance to the authority on the exercise of its role, as defined at clause 25. Clarity is needed on how, and where, that guidance will be developed and debated before being issued, and how he is to be held to account for the exercise of that power.

For the first time in local government legislation, there is also an extraordinary duty placed upon the mayor, at clause 33, to have regard to

"the need to ensure that the strategy is consistent with national policy and international obligations."

That will introduce a national veto and control over local policymaking, which has never before been made that brutally explicit in local government legislation. In respect of international obligations, we are reminded of some past policies of the GLC, where we thought that it would be invading various places.

From below, the threat to the potence of the new authority lies in the fact that lack of definition of the GLA's remit remains in key areas. For example, in planning I am still unsure how the strategic issues over which the GLA will have responsibility will be defined in practice or what consultation will take place to develop the Secretary of State's guidance on the matter.

Planning was always a source of conflict and duplication between the former GLC and the boroughs, and it is important that we avoid such confusion under the new structure. In some areas the proposals in the Bill to exclude London borough councillors from serving on strategic bodies may work to reduce the understanding, support and co-operation from the boroughs.

In assessing whether the new structure is capable of achieving the goals of the new authority, it is clear that, at the bureaucratic level, the bringing together of the expertise from the surviving strategic organisations will provide a proficient professional base for policy advice and research. I support also the introduction of term-limited political appointments, to form the senior policy team for the mayor. That recognises the reality of many key senior appointments in local authorities across the country and the practice, which is to appoint people who are sympathetic to the causes and the objectives of an authority.

The new structure seeks to be as inclusive as possible by ensuring that there is a requirement upon the mayor to consult various interests in the preparation of key strategies, including in some policy areas, the setting up of strategy groups. However, there is an inconsistency: policy areas such as culture warrant the establishment of a strategy group whereas no strategy groups are envisaged to deal with noise, air quality or waste, for example. Similarly, some unusual omissions in the designation of whom the mayor should consult in drafting a strategy may need to be reconsidered. On biodiversity, for example, the Bill does not require consultation with the London Wildlife Trust or the Groundwork Trust.

Inclusive consultation could have been facilitated if the Bill formally supported the formation of a London civic forum, which was mentioned earlier. I hope that we reconsider that proposal, which is supported by the London Voluntary Service Council, the London Churches Group and the Association of London Government. It would establish a cross-sector, cross-community body that was firmly rooted in London's voluntary sector and civil society to advise the GLA on policy making for the capital. Moreover, it would place a duty on the mayor to consult such a forum.

I believe that the assembly's powers should be strengthened so that it has the right to be consulted on appointments to all the groups and consultation bodies. The lack of a right to recall the mayor has been highlighted. Such a right would not be a Lewinsky or impeachment clause; it would give the assembly the opportunity to exercise democratic control if things went wrong.

We should also consider what qualifications people need to stand for the assembly or for mayor. The Bill allows people to stand merely because they have a business interest or own some land in the city. On that basis, anyone who has made a large amount of money from writing poor novels may stand for the position of mayor in any city in the country on the basis that he has bought a small plot.

A fundamental test of the new structure will be whether it can marshal sufficient financial resources and expend them effectively to implement its policies and realise its objectives. I welcome the restoration of the precept but regret the reserved power to limit the GLA's ability to raise a sufficiently high rate to tackle all the long-term needs of Londoners, dependent on the wishes of Londoners. I also regret that we are not restoring the business rate, although that is another debate.

I am pleased that there will be a right of virement across functional bodies and additional funding sources, such as congestion and parking charges. I suggest that we leave it open to the strategic authority to ask the Secretary of State to reconsider additional funding sources, which may be hypothecated to pay for specific services.

I suggest a further and less contentious innovative proposal for additional resources. The City of London is proposing a Bill to reform its electoral arrangements in a pathetic attempt to dress up the inherently undemocratic sham of an authority that seems capable of serving a good dinner but not of running a vital part of London. I suggest that we insert into the Bill an amendment to the Corporation of London's proposal and allow the mayor to negotiate a voluntary lump sum payment or levy on the corporation to support Londonwide projects. Such an amendment would allow the City of London (Ward Elections) Bill to be passed contentedly; without the amendment, the Bill would be unsupportable. Some may

claim that that is a subtle attempt at blackmail against the Corporation of London; all I say is that no subtlety is intended.

The final test of popular support will be whether the new authority can gain and maintain popular support. I believe that people will judge the new authority on whether it is relevant to their lives. That will depend on its powers, resources, influence and freedom to act. It will also depend on whether the people of London have a genuine opportunity to choose the candidate whom they want. Any grubby attempt to manipulate the internal selection process of a political party to prevent any candidate from running will not only have repercussions for that party but may undermine the credibility of the new authority.

I conclude with these optimistic words: I welcome the Bill and wish it good speed. In thanking the Minister for London and Construction and his team, I pay tribute to some of those civil servants who have worked over the past decade to ensure that the Bill is delivered in a form that can be supported. I thank in particular Madeleine Williams, the deputy secretary of the Association of London Government. She pioneered the London study and has worked for the past 12 years to develop alternative proposals once again to secure democratic government for London. People of principle such as her have enabled this debate to take place today.

7.45 pm

Mrs. Jacqui Lait (Beckenham): Unlike other hon. Members who have spoken, I have no interests to declare. I was elected by the people of Beckenham to represent their interests in the House, not to divide my democratic energies between the House and a London assembly.

In the short time that I have represented Beckenham, I have discovered how unenthusiastic the borough of Bromley is about a mayor and an assembly. The area had one of the highest turnouts in the referendum but the smallest possible endorsement for the proposals. I suspect that, if the local elections had been going slightly differently, Bromley may have been the borough that did not vote for the mayor and the assembly.

Hon. Members may remember Bromley as the borough that challenged the fares fair policy, which began the Greater London council's demise. A strong suspicion of a centralised London authority continues to dominate the conversations that I have with people in Bromley about the new Bill. People, especially those involved in local government, are deeply concerned about the imbalance that may reassert itself when there is a mayor and assembly in London.

Many well-off people live in Bromley. The council has managed its affairs—at least until the most recent local elections, when the Labour and Liberal parties formed an uneasy coalition—well and frugally; it has not charged residents huge amounts in local taxation. People are concerned that the Bill will mean that local taxes will increase. We have heard reassurances, although I could not make out whether the Secretary of State said that there would be a charge of 3p or three per cent. per week—

Ms Glenda Jackson: Three pence.

Mrs. Lait: I thank the hon. Lady for that information. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) said, the London School of Economics has calculated that that figure is more likely to be £2 per person per week. That would just be a start, however; as my hon. Friend the Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) said, and as most Conservative Members believe, taxes inevitably go up, however much we try to keep them down. That will be especially true of an organisation such as the assembly; given the opaque nature of the proposed powers, the temptation will be to increase taxes—it will be the people in Bromley who have to pay.

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) pointed out that London has great poverty and great riches. No one would disagree with that but if, as he suggested, there is an attempt to sort out that problem through redistribution of wealth, the mayor and assembly will immediately face huge resentment. Bromley and many of the outer boroughs will be very suspicious of the assembly if it proposes any significant redistribution of wealth.

Hon. Members from both sides of the House have expressed concerns about relations between the mayor and the Secretary of State. Clause 27 makes it clear that the Secretary of State can override anything that the mayor wants to do. I am sure that, with the best will in the world, Ministers will say that that will not happen, but the Bill none the less allows for it.

It does not take a lot of imagination to envisage a situation where Ministers have one objective and the mayor has another, which may be a well-founded desire by the people of London for a certain policy. However, if Ministers disagree, there will be controversy and a debilitating row. Exactly the same could happen between the mayor and the boroughs.

It is clear from the Bill, and the briefing that goes with it, that the mayor can ask the boroughs to do a great deal of work that will cost them a great deal of money, and that the mayor can keep on demanding that work. Again, that will be at great cost to council taxpayers in the boroughs—to no productive effect, necessarily. The speech of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) showed the desire to usurp the functions of the boroughs to bring them in towards the assembly.

Conflict is inevitable, and it will be bitter and hard fought, because we must recognise that the assembly will be as political as this Chamber—although there will not necessarily be the huge majority that we have here. In such circumstances, the government of London could be paralysed. I find that concerning, and I hope that Committee members tease out a much clearer definition of what the mayor does and what the relationships will be.

One matter that has been mentioned in Bromley is the transfer of the police functions to a police authority. I join with others—including the Metropolitan police—in welcoming a Metropolitan police authority. However, the Secretary of State is keeping responsibility for the provision by the Metropolitan police of the national functions required for London, such as the diplomatic protection service, and others. I am not sure how those are to be paid for. Will that money be given by the Secretary of State to the police authority? Will the citizens of London at any time have to pay for those costs to the Metropolitan police? Who will manage those functions? The Commissioner will report directly to the Secretary

[Mrs. Lait]

of State. How will that fit in with the priorities that the Metropolitan police authority may well have? That is another recipe for conflict.

In an interesting speech, the hon. Member for Brent, East bid for the assembly to become the health authority for London, and for more tax-raising powers. I would not be at all surprised if my constituents were not tempted to vote for the hon. Gentleman, if only out of devilment, to try to subvert the assembly, which they do not like. It will be a turn-up for the books if the hon. Gentleman even emerges as a candidate—and that will be an interesting process to watch. It would be interesting to see how many votes the residents of Beckenham would give to him.

I am concerned at the hon. Gentleman's desire for more control. I used to chair a family practitioner committee in the east end of London, and I was the chairman during the move from a family practitioner committee to a family health services authority. The membership went down from 36 to 11, and we changed from a debating society into an organisation that could make decisions and get things done. If we are to change the nature of health authorities into a system that is controlled and run by the assembly—as wished for by the hon. Member for Brent, East—we will go back to those debating authorities, decisions will never be made and, I am afraid, the health service provided to Londoners would not be as well managed as it currently is.

We have had discussions about schedule 13, paragraph 15(5), and we have heard reassurances from the Minister that no money raised from congestion taxation shall go to the Secretary of State. If that is so, why does the Bill state that the Secretary of State will be able to take money and put it into the Consolidated Fund? If he were not going to have the money, we would not need that statement. I seriously hope that we get a clear answer and that that paragraph is deleted in Committee. That is the only way in which the Minister can be seen to carry out her promises on transport.

As everyone will have registered by now, I believe that the people of Bromley are deeply suspicious of the assembly. They are concerned about its centralising effect, and that they will lose local powers. They are concerned that the assembly will cost them money to no good effect. I very much hope that as the Bill goes through the House, it is so amended that the people of Bromley can feel reassured. However, I have to confess that I doubt it.

7.56 pm

Mrs. Eileen Gordon (Romford): Maybe it's because I'm a Londoner, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I love London so. Wherever I go in the world, I come back to London, and my constituency of Romford, convinced that we have the most historic, interesting and vibrant capital city anywhere in the world. London has lacked direction and co-ordination over the past 12 years, but I believe that the Greater London authority will restore that direction and leadership.

When I thought about this debate, I realised that different manifestations of a strategic body for London have been woven like a thread through my life. When my parents were living in a bomb-damaged tenement block in London in 1948, they were given the opportunity to move to a new house at Harold Hill in Romford by the London county council. Many years later, when us children had grown up with families of our own, my parents moved within the Greater London council estate to be near us in their old age—a move that was relatively easy then and is incredibly difficult now, judging from my case work.

When I protested about the abolition of the GLC 13 years ago, my children were toddlers and the placards that they carried were almost too big for them. I am proud that they will soon be able to vote for a mayor and an assembly for London, bringing a unity of purpose and pride back to London.

At the time of the abolition of the GLC, I was angry at the undemocratic way in which it was done. I try to be a forgiving person, but I have never forgotten, and still deeply resent, the vandalism—some of it literal, as well as metaphorical—which followed the abolition. There were skips outside the back door of county hall and furniture was thrown out. The archive was broken up and the building was sold.

Every time I see the new office block going up across the road—which will house offices for Members of Parliament—I look across the river at county hall, which would have made excellent offices and, no doubt, would have saved the public a lot of money. In addition, it would have provided a home for the new assembly. I have nothing against the companies in county hall, but I cannot bear to go in there—it is too painful a memory.

Following the abolition, London fell into the hands of residual bodies and quangos. Our capital city deserves better than that. Services were fragmented, and there was no overview of London's needs. Only a Labour Government could have the courage to restore a democratically elected strategic body for London.

Nowhere is a Londonwide strategy needed more than in transport. Anyone who travels across or in and out of London—and about 3.5 million people work here—needs no lectures about the problems. Trains, buses and the underground do not stop at local authority boundaries, and there must be a co-ordinated public transport strategy. We all know that the sheer volume of traffic—cars and freight—means that it takes only a minor accident or a few cones to bring everything to a standstill. Even bicycle lanes can come to a sudden end because the road goes into a different London borough.

Getting London's transport right—and moving—is a mammoth task, and one for which the mayor and Transport for London will be best suited. The mayor will have a general duty to promote and encourage safe, integrated, efficient and economic transport facilities and services, both to and from and within London. The Bill requires the mayor to prepare an integrated transport strategy which deals with the movement of goods and all forms of transport, including walking.

Transport for London will implement that strategy. It will be an executive body, with a board comprising not politicians, but people who know something about transport and management. It will be answerable to the Greater London authority, and thus to the Londonwide electorate.

I warmly welcome the commitment to concessionary fares for the elderly. Introduced by the GLC and supported by London boroughs, the freedom pass is indeed a liberating concession. It is one of the few advantages of growing older and I know that it is much

appreciated in Romford. My sister was thrilled to get her pass and uses it to full advantage, hopping on and off buses and travelling up to London. By contrast, my sister who does not live in London has to think carefully about travel in her area, as it is so expensive. The freedom pass keeps people young and in contact. I hope that, when we open up river transport, concessions will be available for that, too.

In an area such as Romford, where car ownership is relatively high, many pensioners choose to use public transport rather than cars for local journeys because they have their pass, thus saving further congestion. We certainly do not want granny and granddad gridlock. I am pleased that the Bill, as far as I understand it, enables the Secretary of State to require London local authorities to meet the cost of providing concessions, even when they have not agreed arrangements to do so. The annual round of negotiating agreements has caused pensioner groups much concern in the past; now I hope that there will be a guarantee.

The provision to maintain transport for the disabled is likewise very important, and I am glad that dial-a-ride will be the responsibility of Transport for London and that there will be negotiations with the boroughs about the taxi card. I hope that the mayor and Transport for London will also consider the orange badge scheme. I have been involved in several cases in which the London boroughs seem to have been using different rules for badge holders. Constituents of mine have received fines in Westminster and Camden because their orange badges were not accepted. There should be equality of issue and implementation, giving orange badge holders as much access to parking as possible. The mayor and Transport for London could work with the boroughs on that.

I make no apologies for mentioning minicabs, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North (Ms Perham) did. Like most hon. Members, I wanted minicabs to be regulated, and we now have the Private Hire Vehicles (London) Act 1998, which will begin to be implemented next year. I know that hindsight is a wonderful thing, but I truly believe that, had the GLC been in place, that legislation would have been dealt with years ago. The GLC would not have tolerated unregulated minicabs in London, and who knows how many accidents and assaults would have been avoided?

It makes sense that licensing for both taxis and minicabs should come under one body: Transport for London, transferring from the Public Carriage Office. I again make no apologies for echoing my hon. Friend's request that taxi drivers be allowed to designate taxis as non-smoking and that a charge should be made for those taking the knowledge. At the moment, because it is free to applicants it can be treated in rather a cavalier fashion. Indeed, about 85 per cent. of applicants never attain the knowledge and the successful drivers, who pay for their licences, subsidise the unsuccessful, so passengers pay indirectly for the inefficiency of the system.

Mr. Simon Hughes: There is another view on why so few people qualify, which has to do with the rather difficult to understand central control of the exam process, which makes applying a lengthy process. The office that deals with these matters must be shaken up because the situation is far from satisfactory.

Mrs. Gordon: I absolutely agree. All parties are looking to modernise the system.

I welcome the new police authority for London, the majority of whose members will be from the elected assembly. I also welcome the provision for environmental and waste management issues to be dealt with Londonwide because, again, pollution does not stop at a borough boundary. I further welcome the strategic overview of planning and monitoring London's health services, but I would like to see to what depth that goes.

On the day when the Bill receives Royal Assent, I will feel that the wound of the abolition of the GLC has healed. Once again, we will have a strategic body looking after London, elected by Londoners and believing, as most Londoners do, that ours is the most wonderful city and deserves the best government.

8.6 pm

Mr. John Randall (Uxbridge): It is a great pleasure to take part in this debate. We have heard some excellent contributions, and I single out those of my neighbours, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) and the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell). When the Greater London council was abolished, they both had roles in politics: my hon. Friend was in the House, as he has told us, and the hon. Gentleman was, I believe, a member of that blighted organisation.

I share some of my hon. Friend's views. I was not involved in any of the decision making—I was more likely to be dusting down some old cabinet at the time—but I have some sympathy with the view that reform of the GLC would have been better than total abolition. I must concede, however, that there would have had to be a great deal of reform. This might be seen as a bid by me not to be put on the Committee.

The Bill is lengthy and weighty. It details the functions, finances and electoral arrangements for the new authority. Many of the arguments were rehearsed last year, when we debated the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill. With my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip–Northwood, I am very sorry that the Bill does not include a stronger constituency base.

I would be interested to hear from Labour Members, who have been talking about the great virtues of the GLC, which had a strong constituency base, whether they feel happy that the tie is now pretty well lost. Hillingdon is tied with Ealing. I can see the hon. Member for Ealing, North (Mr. Pound) in his place, and the thought of being tied with him is, of course, greatly appealing. However, if the GLC was such an admirable body, can Labour Members explain why getting rid of the constituency allegiance is a good approach for the new authority?

The House does not need to be reminded that the Conservatives favoured splitting the question posed in the referendum, so that voters would have the choice between having a mayor or an assembly, or both or neither. The Government were not persuaded by our powerful arguments and we ended up with a single question on the ballot paper. At least the debate allowed the House to air the arguments about the future of London government and we are revisiting those arguments tonight.

The referendum result was disappointing. The turnout was a mere 34.6 per cent. and it could be argued that Londoners did not flood to the polls to vote in favour of the new structure. As a Member who represents an outer London borough, I must say that the support for and

[Mr. John Randall]

interest in the referendum was not impressive. The poor turnout resulted in some bizarre logic from the Minister for Transport in London. She argued that the poor turnout was a sign of overwhelming support for the Government's plan, which was a curious defence. I suppose that I am just learning.

The referendum confirmed the Government's desire to introduce the mayor and the assembly as a complete package. We made it clear that we did not believe that the two would work well together. In fact, we believe that the structure in the Bill has a high chance of resulting in conflict between the mayor and the assembly. There is no guarantee that the two will agree. It could be argued that the paranoia over the choice of the Labour candidate betrays the Government's fear of inevitable conflict between the assembly and a Conservative mayor and also between the assembly and a mayor of the old Labour variety. It is also possible that the mayor could be from one party and the majority of the assembly from another, and both would feel that they had been mandated in their elections.

Potential for conflict also exists between the boroughs and the assembly, as many local government leaders have pointed out. The Bill will result in a mayor, an assembly, the London development agency, the Government Office for London and the 32 London boroughs all vying for as much influence and power as they can get. Conflict will result at all the different levels, unavoidably leading to more bureaucracy.

The Conservatives' plan for a committee of the borough leaders or of borough representatives—my preference—to advise the mayor would mean that the existing structure of local government would be integrated into the new arrangement, not excluded as proposed in the Bill. It is difficult to see how the Bill squares with the Government's desire to renew local government, as outlined in the recent White Paper. The Bill makes numerous references to the Greater London authority's strategies having to be compatible with nationally determined policy, but power would not be decentralised to the GLA if its functions were hedged round with so many constraints.

The use of the additional member system for electing the assembly involves two votes, as we have heard. It is not clear why two votes will be necessary to operate the system. The percentage share of the vote achieved at constituency level is surely enough of a basis for allocating the top-up seats. More controversially, why does the Bill propose to have the mayor's deputy chosen from the assembly? Would it make more sense for the deputy to be elected directly? In the event of the mayor's position becoming vacant, there would then be no need to rerun the election. It might be argued that the Labour party is having so many problems trying to find one mayoral candidate who is acceptable to the leadership and the party managers that it might be even more difficult to find a running mate. I wish to put in a bid for the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington because he has relevant experience and blind loyalty to the leadership. I hope to advance his career as much as I can.

Mr. Stephen Pound (Ealing, North): The hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) has already put in a bid for the Opposition to support the candidacy of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). We now hear that Conservative voters in Uxbridge are flooding to the standard being raised, nobly and heroically, by my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell). At some stage might we hear the name of a Conservative who attracts any support on the Opposition Benches?

Mr. Randall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. We do not have a problem with our candidates, because we have so many to choose from. Labour Members seem unable to make up their minds and have to wait for messages to come through. There are some good candidates available who will probably bring the authority quickly into disrepute.

The Bill proposes a London development agency, which would be an additional unnecessary layer of bureaucracy, overlapping with the GLA and local government. Most of the LDA's functions are carried out by other organisations, such as London First. The proposed agency would add yet another layer of bureaucracy on top of all the others proposed in the Bill.

We welcome the idea of a directly elected mayor, working in conjunction with the 32 London boroughs, but we oppose a structure that would come between the boroughs, leading to confusion and conflict. London is a hugely successful city and a major part of the British economy. It has had rave reviews in newspapers and magazines all over the world. It is a major cultural and tourist centre, attracting millions of visitors every year. None of that is the result of the Greater London authority, but of the enterprise and hard work of its people. London needs a directly elected mayor, working with the London boroughs and helping to co-ordinate solutions to the city's problems. It does not need another layer of government on top of those that exist already.

8.18 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Regent's Park and Kensington, North): A dozen years ago, a promise was made to the people of London that at some future time they would again have the chance to be represented as the citizens of a great city should be. There was not a dry eye on the south bank on that grim night in March 1986 when we sang along to the strains of Dame Vera Lynn and imagined the bluebirds over the white cliffs of county hall. The bluebirds are now dead, stuffed with particulates and lead, but the vision remains the same. The Labour Government have delivered on that promise. We have not gone back, because times have changed and the responses required of Government have also changed. We now have a wonderful opportunity to create a new city government for a new millennium. That government will have flair, vision and energy.

A city government that combines the talents of the mayor and the assembly will be able to champion the cause of London, represent its needs, campaign for innovative solutions to its problems and lead on its external relations. Above all, it can offer a truly inclusive model of government, helping to redress the deep divisions that scar the city—divisions between the extremely wealthy and the poor; between the highly trained, educated working population and the unskilled unemployed; between the life opportunities of black Londoners and white Londoners; and between central

London and the suburbs. I was tempted to offer to bridge the gap between north and south London, but I decided not to be silly.

In pursuit of the vital objective of inclusive representation, it is right to break with the idea of electing assembly members matched with boroughs. It is right to draw a mix of members from geographically based constituencies topped up on a citywide basis. The Conservative party is wrong to argue for a form of government drawn from the 32 boroughs.

The Association of London Government represents local government in London and, as last week's grant settlement helped to confirm, it does so extremely well. During the debate on the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill last year, we argued that the worst system would be to have specific boroughs represented in the assembly, either by members directly elected from the boroughs, or by drawing from the leaders of the borough councils.

Mr. Randall: Why, then, was such a system the basis of the Greater London council, which the hon. Lady and her hon. Friends seem to think worked so well?

Ms Buck: The GLC was based on parliamentary constituency borders, not local authority boundaries. I am not arguing that the GLC was the ideal model of government; I do not think it was. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) said, it had flaws, and it is, in any case, right, 12 years later, to consider a new model.

The problems of borough representation are twofold. On the one hand, borough representatives argue for their local agendas, which differ for outer London boroughs and central London boroughs for all kinds of reasons that are reflected in the political control of the boroughs. On the other hand, an assembly drawn from individual constituencies or local boroughs would make it easy for the mayor to construct coalitions of support by favouring particular boroughs or constituencies. That is why the electoral boundaries have been drawn in such a way that each constituency represents at least two local authority areas.

We must allow the Association of London Government to get on with the job it does so well—representing local government. As the hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) said, the leaders of local authorities should be left to get on with representing their own authority's interests.

Responsibility, Mr. deputy mayor—

Mr. Pound: It is Mr. Deputy Speaker at the moment.

Ms Buck: I am sorry, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Responsibility should devolve from the Government, or rise from the boroughs, to reflect particular issues that are being transferred to the mayor and the assembly. Many other hon. Members have put the arguments for co-ordinated and pan-London strategies for issues such as transport, environmental protection, strategic planning and policing. I am perhaps a little jaundiced by my own experience of local borough representation because I represent at least part of the borough of Westminster, whose controlling councillors could not run a whelk stall without seeking to turn it to their electoral advantage, then splitting the profits to pay their own legal fees. I have a particular desire to see that that borough does not have a higher profile in the strategic management of London.

The interaction of mayor and assembly will create an opportunity to develop a new political style based on dialogue and practical negotiation. There will be conflict aplenty. I was surprised and disappointed to hear hon. Members talk as if conflict was a bad thing. It lies at the root of politics, and it is healthy and right as long as it is rooted in a passionate conviction about the best solutions for the problems of London rather than point-scoring exercises or sterile bickering.

The constituency style of representation by which the assembly is to be elected will demand a new style of politics. We shall seek to include in those politics the many disfranchised communities in London. I was particularly pleased to note that representatives of Operation Black Vote have welcomed the mayor and the assembly in the belief that an assembly with powers on economic regeneration and the appointment of a police committee will be perceived as being more important to black Londoners than the local boroughs. We must take the opportunity to reach out to the quarter or so of the London population who are non-white so that we can bring them more directly into our political and civic processes.

I join my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington in asking the Government seriously to consider the idea of a civic forum. That idea, which was debated during our proceedings on the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, would create a vital counterweight to the political management of the city through the mayor and the assembly.

The relations of the mayor and the assembly with central Government will involve more than a little creative tension, as they should. The *Evening Standard* had it about right in its editorial last week, when it said:

"The balance will be hard to strike . . . A Mayor who turned out to be little more than a Departmental Minister will be too tame for London's tastes . . . on the other hand, a Mayor conducting a running duel with central government will be equally damaging."

That comment positively screams for a response along the lines of a third way, but I shall resist that temptation. A challenge will give the mayor and the assembly something to rise to, and will give the Government something to which to respond. Londoners will not forgive any participants who neglect their duty in favour of posturing or vapidity.

The task facing the mayor and the assembly is huge. If we were pitched today into the anticipated annual state-of-London debate, which is a welcome part of the Bill, contributors would rightly focus on transport, an issue addressed by many hon. Members this evening. They could draw on the recent revelation that speeds on the capital's roads have fallen again to a 19th century average of 10 miles an hour. At the same time, however, one child in seven is afflicted with breathing disorders such as asthma.

The recent MORI survey referred to by hon. Friend the Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock) related to an *Evening Standard* poll that found that poor air quality and too much traffic were by far the most serious perceived threats to health. An estimated 24,000 excess deaths in Britain's urban areas are connected to pollution. Tough action cannot come soon enough.

[Ms Buck]

Such a debate would focus also on the need for further and more evenly spread improvements in the Metropolitan police's reduction of crime. It would encourage the police to tackle the injustices of stop-and-search figures that overwhelmingly discriminate against black Londoners. A more accountable Metropolitan police service will be very welcome, and it can and must demonstrate that it is a service for everyone in London.

The debate would also pay attention to an excellent study—on which the Association of London Government should be warmly congratulated—that maps out the challenge of combining economic regeneration in all parts of London with the need for environmental sustainability.

No doubt, contributions would also be sourced to the recent independent public health study on health inequalities in Britain which, alongside other evidence, confirms that the incidence of suicide among young men is reaching a critical—even an academic—level in the city and that the scale of psychiatric morbidity in central London is four times the national average, while also confirming the recurrence in the late 1980s and 1990s of the diseases of poverty, such as tuberculosis, which have been linked to chronic overcrowding and the rise of homelessness. The devastating impact of poverty and social exclusion would be spelt out, drawing attention to facts, such as the fact that, in 1996, one in four of London's children lived in households with no one in work.

The mayor and assembly, with the tools available to them, can take on the policy debate about London's future and simplify and popularise it. There can and must be a transparent set of objectives for change in London and transparency in the measurement of progress. Citizens of London should know as fact whether our city is, at least partially thanks to their efforts, moving towards the goals of a cleaner environment, a more competitive economy and greater social inclusion. For, as "The London Study" points out,

"there is not one London, but many, and children in the different Londons have grown up in different worlds".

Those divisions and that experience have weakened us, and the absence of an effective voice for London has allowed those divisions to deepen. Now, we are being given the chance to make a fresh start. As an Essex girl who came to the city 20 years ago and fell in love with it, that makes me proud.

Henry James summed up the city rather well at the end of the 19th century, when he said:

"It is not a pleasant place, it is not agreeable or cheerful or easy or exempt from reproach. It is only magnificent."

It is good, at last, to see it getting the government that it deserves.

8.30 pm

Mr. Paul Burstow (Sutton and Cheam): I was first elected to my local authority, the London Borough of Sutton, in 1986, at the point at which the Greater London council was about to cease to be. For the past 12 years—it seems more like 15—I have observed the way in which London has been governed as a consequence.

I once saw a chart that was drawn up by someone who was trying to map the lines of accountability of decision making in London following the abolition of the GLC. So confusing was it, with all the quangos and joint boards that had been established, that it looked like a plate of spaghetti. It is no wonder that people have felt increasingly dissatisfied with the quality of governance in our capital city. That is why I welcome the opportunity in the coming weeks and months to debate with the Government how we should re-institute and restore to London what it always needed, which is a voice and a proper way to gather the strategic view and translate it into action.

In so far as the Bill returns to Londoners that right to self-government, I welcome it, as do my colleagues. However, I must point out to the Minister for London and Construction and the Minister for Transport in London that, during the referendum campaign earlier this year, I did not detect much enthusiasm on the doorsteps in my constituency for the Government's proposals. Indeed, the level of awareness of the existence of the referendum was depressingly low. I am sure that Ministers found it depressingly low as they were working hard to try to raise the turnout and raise interest in the issue.

Londoners may have voted yes in the referendum, but many more of them did not express a view one way or the other, and it is inappropriate for any of us to attribute our view to those people who did not cast a vote. In my constituency, few people mentioned the referendum on the doorstep. I dare say that the issue failed to excite constituents of hon. Members on both sides of the House. Perhaps that is a reflection of the general expectation, as recorded in the opinion polls, that it was going to happen anyway—that London would get a new form of government. After all, the majority of Londoners voted in the general election for parties that favoured restoring government for London. Perhaps it also reflected the fact that the referendum did not allow us to debate how London should be governed, but shifted the focus to the more media-friendly question of who should govern London. Like the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman) I believe that it was a mistake for the Government not to allow more questions on the ballot paper, but, equally, I accept that that is now passed and we must deal with the legislation before us. That is what my colleagues and I intend to do.

Offering Londoners no choice of the way in which they were governed was perhaps a sign that the Government lacked confidence in their case—or perhaps they do not trust the judgment of Londoners. That lack of trust goes through the Bill. In some ways, the Government are hard-wiring a lack of trust into the new institutions. I shall demonstrate what I mean. The Secretary of State does not appear to trust the mayor, who is not allowed to trust the assembly or the London boroughs.

The Bill is crammed full of new powers for the Secretary of State to direct and guide the mayor. The purse strings are tightly held by Whitehall. Indeed, as Tony Travers and Gerry Stoker wrote in the Association of London Government's paper, "A Tale of Two Cities, the Government of New York: Lessons for London":

"The greatest doubts about the proposals for London remain around its fiscal and financial capacity. The Mayor of London will have much more than the Mayor of New York to look to higher levels of government for funding. The relationship between the Albany—capital of the state—and New York is not always comfortable.

The proposed new arrangements for London may prove even more difficult for Whitehall given that the funding regime may give the Mayor little option but to look to central government for the increased resources, backed by the votes of some 5 million Londoners."

In other words, the same disease that afflicts local government will afflict the Greater London authority: lack of financial independence. Without that, everything that is welcome in the Bill becomes secondary.

Like any council, the GLA will be subject to the new twin capping regime—so-called sophisticated capping. The Secretary of State has described it as Prescott's sophisticated capping. I am delighted that he chose to add his name to the capping regime. There is also the council tax benefit clawback. The GLA's freedom of manoeuvre will be further circumscribed by the imposition of a spending floor as well as spending ceilings.

The authority will find its power to promote economic, social and environmental well-being—I agree with the hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) that the Bill's wording on this is not appropriate—undermined by lack of discretion and flexibility in using its budgets. It will not have access to the revenues that it needs to fulfil its purpose.

The GLA will be largely dependent on Whitehall for funding. Even new sources come with Treasury strings firmly attached. The proposals for congestion and non-residential parking space charges could leave Londoners footing the bill. Although we have had several welcome exchanges across the Floor and several welcome assurances from Ministers, the Bill makes it clear that moneys could be paid into the Consolidated Fund at the Treasury. There will be a problem if Londoners see themselves footing the bill without all the money flowing back into investment in improved public transport. I agree with the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock) that we need to ensure that there is investment ahead of the introduction of what might be regarded by many Londoners, and many people who live outside London, as punitive charges. A carrot-and-stick approach may be necessary to overcome London's chronic transport problems, but if Londoners learn that the Treasury is siphoning off some of the proceeds, they will regard the charges as yet another tax.

The charges must be clearly earmarked or hypothecated for transport in London. It is clear from the Bill that the Treasury has other plans. I hope that the assurances that were given earlier this evening by Ministers will be reflected in Government amendments to schedules 13 and 14.

Mr. Ottaway: Fat chance.

Mr. Burstow: From a sedentary position, the hon. Gentleman says, "Fat chance."

Clause after clause gives the Secretary of State powers to offer guidance or to intervene. I understand that the technical term for some of them is "Henry VIII clause". Perhaps we should adopt a more modern description of what the clauses are all about and call them the "Ken Livingstone clauses", just in case the persuasive speech of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) leads to his name appearing on the Labour party selection procedure ballot paper and he finds himself on the right side of the desk in the mayor's office.

The GLA will be highly dependent on the grace and favour of central Government for funding. It will also be very much directed by central Government in respect of its policy outputs and strategies.

There is also the relationship between the mayor and the assembly. Alongside the mayor, the assembly is a weak and feeble institution. Liberal Democrats believe that we must rebalance the powers between mayor and assembly to give the assembly more teeth, more authority and greater ability to hold the mayor to account in his work and duties. Even with his or her powers heavily circumscribed by the Secretary of State, the mayor will hold massive powers of patronage through appointments and be subject to only the lightest of checks and balances by the assembly. The assembly has no role in scrutinising appointments, and it will have a largely negative and delaying role in matters of strategy and finance.

Not only does the Bill provide the mayor with a mandate independent of the assembly's mandate: it goes on to deal all the aces to the mayor in his or her relationship with the assembly. In stacking the deck in the mayor's favour, the Bill gives the mayor the trump card in dealing with the London boroughs, as clause after clause takes power away from the London boroughs. In planning and in transport, the balance of power is tilted away from the interests of the individual borough and town hall towards the mayor's office.

The results of concentrating power in the hands of the mayor and failing to institute adequate checks and balances are serious conflicts of interest. The mayor will appoint the board of the London development agency and he or she will also approve its strategy. The mayor also approves the spatial development strategy and has the power to compel London boroughs to bring their local powers into conformity with it. The mayor can even require a London borough to refuse planning permission. Given the retention of the applicant's right of appeal to the Secretary of State, if the mayor directs an authority to refuse planning permission, who picks up the costs if the inspector awards costs against the authority—the mayor or the individual authority? I should be grateful if the Minister could answer that when she winds up the debate.

How will conflicts between the spatial development plan and the LDA's strategy be resolved? Outside London, the regional development agencies are not to be given planning powers, but the LDA will be perceived as having the power to exercise planning powers through the mayor. Those conflicts of interests run far wider than the administrative boundary of Greater London as, in matters of land use, transport and waste management planning, London's footprint—its impact—extends much further. It is important that organisations such as Serplan—the south-east regional planning conference—are in the loop when the mayor develops and consults on his or her strategies.

What are the Government letting go of? The Government Office for London looks set to stay, to fight another day; and the democratic deficit in the health service will remain. Given the Government's stated aim of promoting more joined-up government, they have missed an opportunity to link health and sustainability issues more closely. The Bill does not make it clear that principles of sustainability should underpin all the strategies and policies of the GLA.

[Mr. Burstow]

So far, I have spoken about the relationship between the different tiers of government. The success of the experiment depends on getting that relationship right, but the experiment will fail if the GLA, in all its many guises, does not engage with London's wider civic society. That is why the proposal of the London Voluntary Service Council that there should be a civic forum for London is so welcome. I strongly agree with the comments made by several hon. Members, in particular the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck). Such a forum could build on many existing partnerships and tap a wealth of expertise for the benefit of Londoners. To be an effective partner to the mayor and the assembly, the forum would need to take its authority from statute. It should be provided for in the Bill and be seen to be more than just another consultation mechanism, alongside all the others that the mayor might or might not deem appropriate for the carrying out of his functions—

Mr. Pound: Or her.

Mr. Burstow: Indeed—or her functions. If London government is to be inclusive, consensual and influential, it needs that civic forum. Other hon. Members have said as much.

London needs self-government. The capital needs a strong and effective strategic authority with a buoyant revenue base. There are many aspects of the Bill that I do not like, as hon. Members might have noticed, but it does provide the basis for a constructive debate and I hope that the Government will be receptive to proposals to improve it. If the Bill is not improved before becoming law, there is a danger that the House will have allowed the Government to establish a mannikin mayor with a puppet assembly, the first tied hand and foot to the policy goals of the Government of the day—perhaps not the current Government, but one with entirely different objectives—and the second far too weak to make a difference. That would not be good for London, nor would it be home rule for London; instead, it would be a continuation of the direct rule that has led to the spaghetti-like mess of quangos and joint boards, and to complete confusion about who is responsible for governing London.

8.45 pm

Mr. Clive Efford (Eltham): I join in this debate with a somewhat nasal voice, in deference to my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone). I shall also contribute a considerable amount of knowledge that no other hon. Member can bring to the debate. Having said that, I hope that I shall not disappoint my colleagues too much by announcing that I am not a candidate for mayor of London.

It will not surprise anyone to hear that I welcome the Bill—all 277 clauses. The large number shows the importance of addressing the democratic deficit in London. For more than a decade, London has operated at a distinct disadvantage as a result of a lack of co-ordination in many areas of local government, including planning, economic development, transport and the environment.

London's strategic approach to holding major events has also suffered. For instance, it has been some time since London last put together a bid to hold the Olympics—although some have voiced the opinion that it should do so. The millennium experience exhibition will be staged close to my constituency, and some hon. Members may be surprised to learn that there has been a lack of co-ordination across London regarding that event.

The millennium experience is a major event of national importance that will bring benefits not only to London but to the whole country. Despite the best efforts of many of my former colleagues and hon. Members who now occupy these Benches to introduce some sort of strategic approach across London, there is no chamber co-ordinating that event. The lack of a strategic authority has meant that arguments in favour of exhibitions such as the millennium experience or bids to stage major events such as the Olympics have fallen by the wayside.

Mr. Randall: Will the hon. Gentleman join me in regretting the past actions of the present Minister for Sport, his hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks)—who I believe is mooted as a possible Labour candidate for London mayor? Shortly before Labour's victory in the general election, he tabled an early-day motion suggesting that South Africa, rather than Great Britain, should be the venue for the next World cup.

Mr. Efford: I referred to a London bid to stage the Olympics, not the World cup. I would certainly support the staging of a future world cup in South Africa, and I am sure that that would not detract from the Government's World cup bid and the likelihood that a future world cup will be held in this country, with the final in London.

I wish to address the strategic role of London, which is not easy to deal with in a Bill. I hope that the assembly's members and its mayor will give priority to the function that London performs as a gateway to the rest of the United Kingdom. London is the shop window through which businesses or people thinking of holidaying in the United Kingdom view this country and its regions.

It is an inescapable fact that people look to London when they think of Britain. I do not detract in any way from Manchester's efforts to stage the Olympics, but it is highly unlikely that the International Olympic Committee or any other body that runs international sporting events will agree to stage those events or major sporting finals anywhere but in this country's capital. That is an inescapable role for London, to which the mayor and assembly will need to give priority.

I have already mentioned the scepticism that surrounds the issue of the millennium. I have spoken to many people and hon. Members from the regions who think that too much money is being spent on the millennium, and that it will bring no benefits to them. As a former London taxi driver, I know that many people come to London to visit many of its major attractions, stay longer than is necessary to do so, and spend a considerable part of their holiday travelling to the regions.

I say to those who have criticised the millennium experience as a waste of money that they should regard the event as an opportunity to attract its visitors to the regions. Not enough has been done to achieve that. A strategic authority for London will have the responsibility and the wherewithal to co-ordinate efforts to attract London's visitors to the regions. That issue highlights London's strategic role in the country, which we do not sufficiently appreciate.

Members of the authority will need to resist the temptation to view themselves merely as local representatives for London. There is an opportunity to redistribute resources from London. Currently, taxes paid by people employed in the London area provide a budget surplus of more than £200 per person. I am not recommending that Londoners should pay more than is necessary to the Exchequer in order to subsidise services in other parts of the country, but I recognise that people who are employed in London can make that level of contribution because of the city's special position in the nation's economy.

It is right that London provides a surplus to the nation's capital that will be redistributed to the regions. That, too, demonstrates the importance of London and its strategic role, which could be lost if people focus on resources and try to claw back more and more to London at the expense of the regions.

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock) made a point about relatively high levels of deprivation, particularly in inner London. Does not the hon. Gentleman think that there is a case for greater recognition of the extent of deprivation, such as unemployment, in inner London, which, when we consider the distribution of resources around the country, is sometimes masked by the fact that London is one travel-to-work area, but the employment opportunities in some parts of inner London are relatively few?

Mr. Efford: I accept that. There are examples of that deprivation in Eltham. It is true that there are pockets of deprivation in London which have missed out on resources because of the way in which they have been distributed. I am not suggesting that London is awash with the resources necessary to deal with those problems, but a major capital city such as London has the capacity to provide resources to the Exchequer which can be redistributed. My point relates to the important role of assembly members and the mayor in running the nation's capital, not just a regional government for London, which they need to remember.

I certainly welcome the plans to co-ordinate public transport and the road system in London under the new transport authority. Those plans not only recognise the strategic role of roads in providing transport links, but allow a co-ordinated approach to transport.

My constituency is not served by the London underground. People there rely heavily on the Connex South Eastern rail network to get to central London. That puts them at a considerable disadvantage because Connex is an extremely inefficient provider. It could be argued that that is largely because there is little alternative for the fare-paying public. They could get in their cars and drive to central London, but it is an incredibly inconvenient journey to have to make.

My constituency is bisected by two major arterial roads—the A20 and the A2—which are heavily congested every morning, and my constituents suffer the resulting pollution. Introducing a strategic approach to public transport and giving the Greater London authority some influence over franchisees is to be welcomed.

I take this opportunity to promote one of my pet subjects, which is the notion of turning over considerable chunks of our major arterial roads to designated bus links that can be publicised as extensions of the London underground network. To introduce a rail link into the London underground network in south-east London is likely to take considerable time, but if we had a dedicated bus route, which was timetabled and understandable, and advertised in a way not dissimilar to the London underground network, we could provide major links with some of our smaller towns in the Medway area.

We could bring people in on the M20 and the M2 to link with the new Jubilee line extension at North Greenwich, thereby allowing them to continue their journey. The exchange between a bus service of that nature and the London underground should be as seamless as changing from the Bakerloo to the Central line.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is now a growing consensus in London, among people of all parties and among those who belong to no party, that the part of the transport system that it is easiest to develop and to make responsive and flexible is the bus system? The hon. Gentleman's suggestion of more dedicated bus routes across the Greater London boundary, and within it, would be quicker to implement, and far less costly, than any of the alternatives immediately available.

Mr. Efford: Yes, the road network is there, and the technology certainly exists to provide priority for buses at traffic lights and so on. We could at least begin to tackle the growth in traffic volume within the M25 boundary, especially in south-east London, where there is no alternative to the rail network. That would encourage people out of their cars and on to public transport, and allow them easily and swiftly to join the extension of the London underground network.

I welcome the fact that certain responsibilities have been given to the mayor, especially that of improving air quality, which is related to the promotion of better public transport links. When I was chair of the environment committee in Greenwich, we undertook a survey outside several schools. We measured air quality throughout the day, and identified a serious pollution problem when parents were dropping off their children. The nice little school run, which is often undertaken when the car's engine operates at its least efficient, was making a considerable contribution to the poor air quality around some schools. At the same time, some parents in the area were part of the campaign to close one of the roads due to poor air quality.

I have a problem with road pricing, of which I know my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction is aware. I have shared platforms with him on which we have discussed the issue. He has made a very good case, and I commend his abilities on the issue to everyone.

The subject of the school run leads me to question whether road pricing will achieve its objective. Some of the most polluting journeys will not be prevented by it. Road pricing will be paid for by those who use their cars regularly along whichever roads charging is introduced. Those who can afford bigger cars will be able to afford the charges. Those who cannot, whose cars are perhaps less well maintained and cause more serious pollution, will be inconvenienced. Indeed, they may subsequently cause greater pollution by making even longer journeys in order to avoid paying charges.

The jury is out on road pricing as far as I am concerned. I am not convinced that it will bring about the desired reduction, but I welcome any opportunity to raise

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additional resources which can be invested in public transport. It is slightly perverse that the very pollution that we want to eliminate will be the source of such investment. Although I am yet to be convinced that road pricing is the best way forward, I accept that the mayor should have such an option in his or her armoury in order to try to deal with the ever-growing problem of traffic pollution in London.

I think that everyone will welcome the new police authority. Anything that creates transparency in the operation of the Metropolitan police is to be welcomed. I shall not go into much detail, because I am certain that we will have an in-depth debate on the Metropolitan police early in the new year, following the publication of the report on the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence, who was murdered in my constituency.

My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) referred to the application by the police in London of stop-and-search powers. It is a sad fact that an innocent black person who lives in London is eight times more likely to be stopped and searched by the police than a white person. The range of powers that the police have used, which are recorded in the latest annual report, shows that there is a problem with the way in which they target certain sectors of our community.

The point must be made that democratic accountability is not a solution in itself. We must have adequate information in order to be able to monitor what the police do and how they target their resources. Such information is not collected. If the new strategic authority is to be an effective scrutineer and monitor of the Metropolitan police, it must conduct an urgent review of how police activities are monitored, how statistics are collected, what statistics are collected, and what methodology is used to collect them.

Such scrutiny is essential if the police authority is to be effective and to run the sort of police force we all want for the city of London. I end with a plea to serve on the Committee that considers the Bill.

9.4 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): Perhaps I may start by commenting on the penultimate point made by the hon. Member for Eltham (Mr. Efford)—who, of course, knows his way around London better than the rest of us. To be serious, he made an important point about the Metropolitan police, and the Metropolitan police authority to be established by the Bill. I hope that, when we have discussed these matters a little more, he will agree that it is not enough to establish an authority whose members include several elected members, and to assume that the element of democratic accountability created thereby will resolve some of the problems instanced by the Stephen Lawrence case.

The hon. Member must know, as I do, that it is necessary to change the culture from within, and that that cannot be done simply by monitoring, or by providing management information, or even by instituting democratic accountability to members of an authority. I suspect that the efforts of management inside the Metropolitan police, and perhaps the relationships that are forged at borough level—such as between the local head of police in a given borough and the community in which that segment of the police service operates—are more likely than anything else to create the change of culture inside the police that all hon. Members seek.

I shall now discuss the principles of the Bill. I do not represent a London constituency. Like the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck), I started as an Essex boy, as it were, in that area which was Essex when I was born there and is London now, but I have worked in London all my working life. It might be useful to inject into the debate a sense of its importance to Members beyond London. London is a powerful influence on our constituencies and the wider region in which we work, so we are keen to ensure that the Bill is effective. The Bill is part of our constitution making, so we are anxious that it should proceed along the right lines.

As London is obviously a world city, we are not constructing the debate, or debating the Bill, on the basis that London should be examined within its own confines. I believe that hon. Members on both sides of the House substantially accept the Government's contention that London requires citywide government, not simply because it is a big place, but because it has a range of responsibilities, and because a range of issues affect people throughout and beyond London and have an impact on the region—and the nation, as the hon. Member for Eltham was at pains to point out.

During the passage of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Act 1998, I did not dissent from the principle of establishing some form of citywide government, because it was obvious to me that London occupies a unique position in this country and is a unique city. Although we have not reached that stage, in due course other cities may, in like fashion, desire to establish directly elected mayors to help manage their government, for reasons which, curiously, have not been mentioned in the debate.

We speak of the importance of giving Londoners greater democratic involvement in decisions that affect all of London, but the electorate's participation in recent elections in London has been low. The greatest single contribution that a directly elected mayor for London could make might be to increase the participation of the electorate in elections, and in subsequent decisions as to what is to happen in the city as a whole.

I make those arguments partly because debate on the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill centred so much on the questions that should be put to the electorate, and in fact the electorate were not given an opportunity to vote for a mayor and separately to choose whether an authority or assembly should be directly elected or constructed out of the boroughs. That is, in a sense, at the heart of the reasoned amendment tabled by my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) and others.

It is important to recognise that there is a problem at the heart of the Bill. It was not resolved by the referendum, because the referendum gave the electorate of London no opportunity to express a discrete view on this subject, which is how London is to be accurately represented in the government of London that is proposed in the Bill.

As the Minister will know, I supported and wrote about the desirability of a directly elected mayor before the general election. I am not party to a change of mind on

the subject. However, given the structure of the Bill, I do not see the precise form of directly elected mayor that I for one was talking about. At this stage, we are not dealing with a directly elected mayor as a mechanism for promoting greater participation in local government. Instead, we have the proposal of a mayor as an individual operating on a wide—almost regional—basis.

That raises the question, as the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) said, whether we are talking about regional government or local government. The answer is that we are talking of neither. Instead, we are discussing citywide government. It is important to retain that distinction. In that I play a small part in these proceedings, I do not propose to treat the Bill as if it were a stalking horse for regional government throughout the country. The circumstances that apply to London are unique, and the Bill would be all the worse if it were to be treated as a precedent.

I hope that the Minister, when replying to this or future debates, does not fall prey to the trap, as the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) signally did, of treating the Bill as part of a route towards the construction of regional government.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that it is entirely possible to argue that the capital city of any country should have, as many do, its own form of metropolitan area government. That is the position in Australia and the United States, for example. The question that is raised by that—I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman agrees—is what we then do to create regional government for London.

Would it not have been better if the Government had thought through their constitutional agenda for England, so that we knew at the beginning of the exercise whether we would get a parliament for England or regional government, and, if so, where city government for the capital fitted in, rather than legislating for the metropolitan area of London first without any knowledge of whether we would have regional government, and if so of what sort, let alone a parliament for England, which some of us support?

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman thinks carefully about these issues, and I think that he makes an extremely good point. I intended to mention the difficulty of seeing the Bill in its constitutional context. In a sense, it is easier to see it in isolation than to divine what its context might be. I am not in the business of offering the Government solutions for how we might introduce regional government.

Mr. Hughes: We are.

Mr. Lansley: The hon. Gentleman rightly says from a sedentary position that he is in that business. We differ on that, so I shall not offer a solution to the Government, advising them how in future they might pursue regional government. We would then be presented with the difficulty, in London, of boroughs, citywide government, and even a tier of regional government.

The Bill relates to citywide government, and that means that the Government Office for London will continue in substantially the same fashion. In a real sense, we shall continue to have both citywide government and regional government under the proposed legislation. However, I am not in the business of giving the Government an opportunity or cause to go further and construe the mayor and the Greater London authority as a regional form of government. It is fair to treat the proposals as a citywide form of government, and consider how they relate to the city and the issues of the city.

It has been central to the Official Opposition's argument and to mine that the Bill fails in the critical respect mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson). It does not reflect the character of London as it is experienced by the people of London. There are three main issues of constitution making where the Bill does not yet satisfy. First, when one constructs political institutions, it is best—I would suggest mandatory—to follow political identity.

As a Member of Parliament from East Anglia, I do not believe that there is a political identity called the eastern region, so it does not make sense to create a form of government for that region. Unlike some other regions, London has a political identity. Whether that identity precisely matches the boundaries of the former Greater London council is a matter for debate. However, as the hon. Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North said, that political identity consists of many citywide problems, but many Londons within that. That is at the heart of the political identity of London.

I remember talking about Essex London, Surrey London and Middlesex London in a previous debate. I was born in Essex London, which is not necessarily first and foremost in London. In many parts of London, one is primarily in the relevant area rather than in London. During the Uxbridge by-election campaign, we were well aware that it was not just Uxbridge.

Mr. Raynsford: When did the hon. Gentleman last hear a popular song celebrating belonging to Uxbridge or saying "Maybe it's because I'm a Northolter"? Has he ever heard evidence of that?

Mr. Lansley: I am trying to remember the last time that a song was written about Hornchurch.

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): Doing the Lambeth walk.

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend mentions the Lambeth walk. I have not yet arrived at the point at which I believe that popular music culture should be the determining factor for governance in London. I think that we are some way from that.

Mr. Randall: Does my hon. Friend know whether there is a cricket team for London, as opposed to Middlesex, Surrey or Essex?

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend makes a better counter to the Minister than I managed. I shall rest on the superiority of sporting culture over musical culture.

The referendum has not resolved my first problem. It would be constitutionally wrong to suggest that a pre-legislative referendum could settle the issue. It is right, as the reasoned amendment suggests, to look for a form of authority that combines the executive responsibility of a mayor with an assembly established from within the London boroughs.

[Mr. Lansley]

It has been argued during the debate that it is impossible for those from the boroughs to have the necessary strategic view. That misses the point that, in any form of government, if a strategic view fails the test of acceptability and ownership for the local communities, it fails the test of good government.

The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) said that acceptance was one of the tests of good government. If the wider strategy is not accepted because the local interests that tend to be derided in this context are overridden in many areas, it fails the test of good government. Bringing the local interests—the many Londons—into the authority will produce a creative tension in the relationship between them and the mayor, combining the driving force and strategic vision that the directly elected mayor for London is intended to provide with the scrutiny and accountability of the boroughs.

The second issue is clarity of responsibilities and functions. Far from accepting the proposition of the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) that the Bill will introduce responsibility and clarity, I suggest that the opposite is true. In place of a range of bodies with separate clear functions and relationships to boroughs and Government, the confusion that emanates from the Bill about whether Secretary of State will be making decisions will result in a lack of clarity on where responsibility lies.

Planning is a good example, which goes to the heart of setting strategies.

It is difficult to be clear about the relationships whereby a borough will establish its unitary development plan—at the behest of the so-called spatial development strategy. The mayor, in a way that seems to go beyond what is asked in other areas of regional planning guidance, will be able to declare the UDPs incompatible with the spatial development strategy. If the mayor and the authority have particular land use objectives that they want carried through into the UDPs, they can do it by that mechanism.

Over and above that, and highly confusingly, the mayor will be able to direct a borough to refuse an application. One wonders on what basis that is to be so. A borough should apply the UDP, as it is a plan-led system. If it does so in a way that will not be open to appeal or to call-in by the Secretary of State because of departure from the plan, why is the mayor being given that additional ability to go beyond the normal relationship of regional planning guidance to UDP? Far from getting clarity, we will get confusion.

The third issue is that the Bill exhibits characteristics that were rightly criticised in debates on the Scotland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 1998. The Government seem to believe that the writing of constitutions can be accomplished substantially by suggesting what objectives should be met and then construing that the various bodies concerned will engage in constructive partnership for the achievement of those objectives. In practice, one has constitutions—just as one has to have contracts—to determine what happens when those partnerships and agreements fail.

There is some confusion here. For example, the hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock) rightly talked about the importance of training and employment to economic development in London. That is central to bringing improvement into parts of inner London. In practice, of course, the economic development strategy that will be set by the London development agency will command the support of the business community only if greater business involvement is implied.

At the moment, business involvement—through consultation—is largely at the behest of the LDA, rather than the Bill mandating greater involvement from bodies that best represent business—for example, through the London Business Board. Unless that ownership is built into the process, any breach between the LDA and the business community will not be resolved. Likewise, there is a suggestion of partnership between the London training and enterprise councils and the economic development strategy, but no mechanism for making them come together. It is important that they do.

In a range of areas, it difficult to see how disagreements are to be resolved. The greatest disagreement could be between a mayor elected for four years on a platform with strategic vision—if a mayor does not bring strategic vision to the process, what else will he bring?—and the Government, who have their view of what should happen in London.

I will not bore the House by reciting them, but other hon. Members have rightly pointed out that the number of occasions when the Secretary of State will take the power to override, second-guess or effectively dictate the decisions of the mayor and the authority on a range of issues suggests that, when conflict arises, all the issues and all the answers will transfer to the Government rather than rest with the mayor and the authority.

Hon. Members on both sides of the House have mentioned hypothecation of user charges to transport. Reference was made to public transport, but I hope that Ministers will refer to hypothecation to transport expenditure. I have two reservations.

First, as a representative of many people who will pay user charges in London but do not live there, I hope that user charges will not be used narrowly to benefit London public transport and transport infrastructure, without reference to the benefits of ensuring that it is easy to get in and out of London on public transport.

Mr. Gapes: Does the hon. Gentleman accept that large numbers of Londoners—including my constituents who live by the A12 to Essex and the east, and others who live by major roads into the city—suffer the consequences of pollution and associated problems such as noise? It must be just that Londoners should receive some compensation from people who live in leafy areas outside the city and cause environmental pollution when they travel into London.

Mr. Lansley: The point of congestion or user charging is not to put money into the pockets of people who live next to the A12; the charges should be used to ensure that transport noise and pollution are reduced. That is what will benefit people who live by the A12; they should not personally benefit financially because they live in a polluted atmosphere.

Mr. Efford: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Lansley: No. I have taken up a lot of time, so I should come to a conclusion rather than take interventions.

In checking on the Government, people should consider not only hypothecation but additionality. I warn hon. Members that, if the Government are allowed to hypothecate user charges for transport purposes but simultaneously to reduce transport expenditure in the programme budget, the benefit will be negligible.

Mr. Wilkinson: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Lansley: My hon. Friend must forgive me; I said that I would not take any more interventions, so I should be consistent.

The Bill has given rise to high expectations. The proposals for a directly elected mayor with a strategic vision for London are designed to encourage greater democratic participation, but I fear that the Government's intention comprehensively to establish the ascendancy of the Secretary of State over the mayor will frustrate that aim. Like my hon. Friends, I regret that the Bill will not directly involve the boroughs and allow them to bring their concerns to the forefront when the authority determines strategy. In these respects, in so far as the Bill is confused about responsibilities and where policy conflicts will be settled, it leaves much to be desired.

9.28 pm

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): My credentials in this debate—apart from the fact that I represent Upminster on the edge of east London—are that I was born, brought up and educated in London and come from a family of Londoners. For the first 21 years of my working life, I was employed by the Port of London Authority and I saw the decline in the use of the River Thames and the enclosed docks. I experience, as most of us do, the terrible congestion that we have to put up with day in and day out on the roads, although most days I travel to the House on public transport.

My view on the political identity of London is somewhat different from those that have been expressed. Some of my constituents come from the original Essex towns and continue to see themselves as Essex people, but the vast majority of them moved out to the east from inner London and feel that they are Londoners. Harold Hill, for example, is an old Greater London council/London county council estate, and the people who live there see themselves as Londoners.

Mr. Lansley: Try saying that in Hall Lane.

Mr. Darvill: I have canvassed in Hall Lane and know it well. I feel reasonably well qualified to speak in this important debate because of my background and experience.

I wish to congratulate the Secretary of State and his Front-Bench colleagues on introducing the Bill so early in the second Session of this Parliament. In the 19 months since the general election, we have had the Green Paper, the White Paper, the referendum legislation, the referendum itself and now the Bill. That is good progress. The consultation period was important. When the Bill is enacted, its provisions will form an important part of the constitutional changes that will help us to modernise our country for the new millennium.

Clause 2(5) and schedule 1 indicate that the Secretary of State can have a radical review of the assembly's constituency boundaries, and the Bill makes it clear that that is an option for the Secretary of State. I am one of those hoping for a radical review sooner rather than later. I would have preferred multi-member constituencies on a sub-regional basis. That was emphasised in the Green Paper, but it did not receive enough debate London wide, as we focused on the constituency link—important though that is. London's sub-regional emphasis should be underlined, and I hope that, as the strategic authority develops, we will leave that open as an option for the future.

I made representations to the Local Government Commission when it was drawing up the constituency boundaries, and I know that other hon. Members made the same arguments. In my area, we share a health authority with Barking and Dagenham, and the transport structure of our area goes along the Thames parallel. It would have been far more suitable for the constituency boundaries to reflect those strategic views—albeit not on a totally sub-regional basis. However, that is another matter for the future. I recognise that the constituency boundaries were drawn as they were for convenience and speed.

I am a member of the all-party Thames gateway group, and we are working in partnership with the public sector. The Bill will allow partnerships to promote the sub-regions and to assist in the development of strategies, as well as economies. Bearing all that in mind, my borough of Havering would have been much better placed with Barking and Dagenham because of the links to which I have referred.

I welcome the package of electoral voting methods—by the supplementary vote system for the mayor, and by the first-past-the-post system and the additional member system on the d'Hondt formula for the assembly. I had difficulty reading schedule 2 of the Bill, and I had to read it several times before I was able to understand it. I was certainly relieved to see the explanatory notes.

The principle of closed lists has been discussed many times in this House and in another place during the consideration of the European Parliamentary Elections Bill. I sat through some of those debates, but did not contribute to them. Opposition Members often made accusations to the effect that few Labour Back Benchers supported the Government. They did, of course, support the Government in the Lobby.

There are advantages to closed lists. In democratic terms, it is for the political parties to decide on the pecking order of the lists. Political parties that do not allow their own internal democracies to flourish and do not encourage wider member participation will do themselves no good, and eventually will suffer. My party benefited from changing its internal rules for electing candidates. The Conservative party has suffered because it did not—although it has changed, belatedly. Those, however, are matters for the parties and not for Parliament.

The closed list will be simple. All candidates in the list will be named and the electorate will know whom they are voting for—contrary to press reports during the European Parliamentary Elections Bill debates. There was a popular misconception that people would not know who the candidates were. Most of the electorate vote for the party of their choice as well as for the candidate.

I am absolutely certain that, for example, in local elections, some of the electorate voting in multi-member wards do not fully understand the system and often

[Mr. Darvill]

mistakenly vote for the wrong candidate. My experience in local election counts over the years is that, quite often, the candidate for a particular party whose surname starts with an "A" is likely to get more votes than those with names that start with letters further down the alphabet. A closed-list system would avoid that.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I have never understood the justification for that argument. Is the hon. Gentleman honestly telling us that it is better for the electorate to have no say as to which of the Labour party candidates they would prefer to elect, and to have to accept the list that is presented to them?

Mr. Darvill: One has to consider the provisions as a package. I would argue that, for the GLA, as a strategic authority, and for the European elections, it is acceptable to have a party list, bearing in mind the fact that people are not excluded from voting for candidates in local and parliamentary elections. When people vote in a closed-list system, they will know who the candidates in the party list are.

Mr. Hughes: How can one express the judgment that one likes one of the party's candidates but not another? Voters may be disfranchised because they decide to vote for nobody rather than accepting as a package a list of people some of whom they would be happy to see elected but with one of whom they fundamentally disagree, regardless of party allegiance.

Mr. Darvill: Some members of the electorate may take that view, but as the hon. Gentleman himself said earlier, there is no ideal system, and I believe that, on balance, we have to accept that weakness.

The electorate will have a package of democratic representatives. It is important to distinguish the strategic role that the GLA will play. As with the European elections, and bearing in mind the fact that people will have ward councillors and Members of Parliament who fit into the democratic process, I see no wrong in the system. With the benefit of proportional representation, more votes will count and a new dynamic will be released in our political life.

I am pleased that clause 25 provides for the authority to promote the health of Londoners as well as promoting economic and social development in Greater London. Clause 27 is an important safeguard, in that the mayor will not be able to do anything that will duplicate the statutory functions of Transport for London, the police and fire authorities or the London development agency. Subsection (9) will allow the mayor to use the powers under the clause to co-operate with other public bodies to co-ordinate and facilitate activities on a wider than local basis.

Clause 33 provides for the mayor's strategies. There will be no shortage of strategies on matters such as transport, economic development and regeneration, biodiversity, municipal waste management, air quality, ambient noise, culture, the health of London, and something close to my own heart: promoting the use of the Thames for passenger transport and freight.

The transport strategy in clause 123 and the transport functions of the authority covered in clauses 122 to 201 are of the utmost importance and priority, and a London *Evening Standard* poll recently showed transport to be a priority of Londoners. Clauses 200 and 201 are probably the most radical, providing as they will a framework within the GLA for the introduction of road charging schemes and non-residential parking levies across all or part of London.

Several Conservative Members have suggested that those powers were not emphasised in the lead-up to the referendum. However, they will be an important feature in the lead-up to the elections in May next year. If mayoral candidates do not want to use those powers, they can stand on that platform and give Londoners an opportunity to decide on that basis. It is a false argument to say that the powers, which were mentioned in the White Paper, should have received greater emphasis during the referendum debate.

I welcome the ability that the boroughs will have to introduce parking schemes in their areas, subject to the agreement of the mayor. It is essential to ensure the hypothecation of the net revenues from those charges and levies for spending on a wide range of transport measures, in support of the mayor's integrated transport strategy. A clean, safe, efficient and reasonably priced public transport system for London is crucial, because otherwise congestion will worsen, the health of Londoners will suffer, the Londonwide economy will suffer and regeneration will be more difficult to achieve.

Transport is the key to a better London. Whatever strategy the mayor puts forward, it will be difficult to sustain and develop without an improvement in public transport. Londoners see transport as a priority for the mayor and GLA, when elected.

I have a background in the Port of London Authority and I am especially interested in promoting the use of the Thames, which is an under-used asset. As my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) said, the decision by Westminster council to transport waste by road rather than by barge along the river was disgraceful. The mayor and the GLA will have an important opportunity to develop a meaningful strategy to ensure that more freight is transported by water-borne modes of transport. More passenger use should also be made of the river, especially through a river bus scheme. Experiments have been carried out in the past, but they have not been successful because of the poor integration of the schemes with other forms of transport. The experimental schemes also did not extend beyond the centre of London, but river buses should be extended to the east and west to encourage greater use. The mayor and the GLA will be able to insist that integrated transport links include river bus stops.

The Bill deserves the support of the House and it has the support of Londoners. The Members of Parliament who will scrutinise the Bill in Committee will have an important role to play to ensure that it becomes good law and that the mayor and the GLA work effectively. The principles of the Bill are sound and welcome, and the sooner it is enacted the better. I support the Bill's Second Reading and commend it to the House.

9.44 pm

Mr. John Horam (Orpington): I apologise to the House for having had to leave the Chamber for about two and a half hours earlier to fulfil an engagement that I could not reasonably have postponed. I managed to hear

the opening speeches made by the Deputy Prime Minister, by my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) and by the hon. Members for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) and for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes).

The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey is flagged up in the *Evening Standard* tonight as having said in his speech that he would be another candidate for mayor, although he seemed to me to suggest that he would be a candidate for the assembly. Whichever interpretation of his remarks is correct, I welcome the gathering number of candidates for mayor. The more, the merrier. If the hon. Member for Brent, East stands in addition to an official Labour candidate, I shall be delighted. To have Conservative, Liberal Democrat and independent candidates standing would be excellent for London.

I congratulate the Minister for London and Construction, who has a great interest in these matters, on the two schemes—they have been advertised in the *Evening Standard*—for a new building to house the assembly and the mayor at Camden or on the riverside. Each, in its totally contrasting way, is excellent. One makes use of an existing building, and the other would create a new building by Norman Foster. The latter, in particular, is brilliant in conception, but I believe that we would be mistaken to give the assembly a new building to play with at enormous cost to the London public.

The old Greater London council buildings still exist, and I understand that the chamber and associated offices are not used. It was a splendid place for the old London assembly, and I do not see why the building cannot be used for the new one, rather than our going to the trouble and expense of constructing or renovating another building. I like the proposed buildings, but some cautious cost effectiveness would not go amiss.

Mr. Raynsford: The hon. Gentleman's argument would have a little more force if his party had not, when in power, decided to change the use of the building so that it is now a place in which fish swim rather than one in which politicians debate.

Mr. Horam: All human life is there, no doubt. The old building contains a hotel and an excellent Chinese restaurant that is occasionally visited by hon. Members. I cannot see why the assembly and the mayor cannot use the premises, which are excellent and well known. The option should be considered, and, although I put the point light heartedly, I hope that the Minister will know that I mean it.

The hon. Member for Brent, East said that one of the worst and most immediate problems facing any mayor or assembly elected to run London would be traffic congestion. That is indeed the case. It can take two hours to get from central London to Orpington, which is on the very edge of the old GLC area. It can take that time between 4 pm and 6 pm, and it seems to be no quicker no matter what evening it is. Friday and Monday are the same.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague) came down to speak last week, but he had the good sense to go by train from Victoria to Bromley South, which took him between a quarter of an hour and 20 minutes. That is the daily contrast in London between travelling by car—rather foolishly if one is going from Orpington to central London—and going by public transport.

The Bill contains the idea tried elsewhere in the world of a congestion tax or user tax, to be combined with a car-parking tax. That is an idea whose time may have come, but there are severe difficulties. First, obviously, the ordinary motorist may feel that unless he gets something out of the proposal, it will simply be yet another tax—and a considerable one at that. Already, the motorist pays about £31 billion a year in taxes, but only about a fifth of that goes back to him in transport spending. The Exchequer's total take from an average litre of unleaded petrol is about 78 per cent. The amount has gone up and up under Conservative and Labour Governments because of the fuel price escalator. It is a huge burden on motorists, and we must consider what they get back from it.

We will have to get used to the idea of green taxes. If we are to get the idea across and make it work, it is vital that the motorist, who is being taxed and inconvenienced, can see some compensating, clear advantage as a result of the extra imposition.

That means ring fencing of the money that will be raised through the two additional imposts. These days, there is much talk of hypothecation, which is a controversial idea, but one that has a long history. I think that the ship money was the first example of a hypothecated tax in this country. Levied in the 17th century by Charles I, it was one of the factors that led to the civil war, so such taxes are not without their political dangers. Another example was the road fund tax, which was memorable for being lost without trace about five years after it was introduced. The history of hypothecated taxes is not a good one, however good the intentions behind them may have been.

On reading the Bill more closely—it is a very long Bill—I was alarmed to find that schedules 14 and 15 would give the Secretary of State clear powers to take a portion of the proceeds from those taxes. He would have to hand them over to the Consolidated Fund, there is no question about that.

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am grateful for the encouragement that the hon. Gentleman has given the idea of congestion charging. As Chairman of the Select Committee on Environmental Audit, it is only right and proper that he should do so. He highlighted some of the difficulties that the mayor and the assembly will have to tackle. I reiterate yet again that congestion charges will be spent in their entirety on the mayor's integrated transport strategy. If they are raised in the boroughs, they will be spent there. There is a clear commitment—and so there should be, as we are talking about raising sizeable amounts of money—that the system should be reviewed after 10 years. If funds are no longer required for the integrated transport strategy because public transport has improved so much, congestion is down and the air is cleaner, it is entirely right and proper that moneys that are not being used in that way should go into the Consolidated Fund.

Mr. Horam: I hear what the hon. Lady is saying and I clearly heard the Deputy Prime Minister briefly reiterate

[Mr. Horam]

in his speech that, for 10 years, 100 per cent. of the proceeds of the taxes will be spent on transport, which I welcome. It is a new commitment—unless it has been said before and I missed it—and I welcome the fact that it was either reiterated or declared tonight. The worrying aspect is that it is one thing for Ministers to say that on a Monday evening in this debate, but it is another for it to be in the Bill. The fact of the matter is that schedules 14 and 15 of the Bill contain powers—I see the Minister for Transport in London smiling, but she knows that they are there—that a future Government could use for different purposes.

Ms Jackson: We have all heard that concern reiterated by more than one hon. Member tonight. Ministers have made a clear commitment—and not only this afternoon and this evening—as to where the moneys raised from congestion charging will be spent. We will take notice of what has been said about the two schedules to which the hon. Gentleman referred.

Mr. Horam: I am glad that the Minister will take notice of what has been said, but it is an important point. As the hon. Lady said, as Chairman of the Environmental Audit Select Committee, I am committed to try to do something sensible on all these problems. It is vital that we win over the public. At the moment, they are extremely sceptical, if not cynical, about the extra taxation. They will regard it merely as an extra impost, unless they can see some tangible benefit from it, which will be hard for the Government to achieve, however it is spent.

It is not merely a question of the money being ring-fenced, ear-marked or hypothecated—whatever the term that one wants to use—as the second point is that it must be additional, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) said, among others. It is not good enough for it simply to be hypothecated; it must be additional expenditure, otherwise the whole point will be completely lost. If we find at some subsequent date, despite the Minister's bold remarks this evening and those of the Deputy Prime Minister, that some funds are removed, beneath the table as it were, or that in some future settlement they say that they have lost a hard battle with the Treasury—they usually do—Londoners will not thank them for that approach.

I hope that the Government can demonstrate that additionality is for 10 years, just as they say that hypothecation is. It will take at least 10 years to make an impact on transport congestion. The Automobile Association has demanded not only hypothecation and additionality but that the proceeds should be seen to be spent before they are raised. I thought that that was a little over the top and I do not go along with that, but I take the point.

Such taxation can begin to tackle some of the problems by deterring and helping to manage traffic, and building infrastructure in a different way. Planning can also do much. In that respect, I strongly support the Deputy Prime Minister's initiative under the general label of World Squares for All. He came out strongly in favour of proposals, again by Norman Foster, to enhance Trafalgar square, Whitehall and Parliament square by pedestrianising larger parts of them. That will affect traffic, but the matter is important to London as a capital city. This is a major heritage area, not only for Londoners, but for the whole country and for tourists. We want to be proud of it. We want its buildings, including our Parliament, set off properly. Currently, Trafalgar square is a traffic roundabout, which is disastrous for people trying to enjoy their surroundings.

The Deputy Prime Minister made a strong statement. I hope that he does not allow it to be whittled away by all the usual excuses about where the traffic goes. We have to choose between doing something dramatic and sensible that I believe would be applauded by all Londoners and some bad consequences in slightly more traffic congestion. We simply have to live with that. I suspect that if something sensible were done, people would quickly come to terms with it, other arrangements would be made and the congestion would not be as bad as many fear. I hope that the mayor, whoever he or she is, takes up such initiatives and puts pressure on the Government to see them through. I hope that that will be the sort of benefit that people can see from having a strong mayor.

Penultimately, I turn to the police. I do not expect a reply this evening because the matter will be debated tomorrow. If hon. Members watch "The Bill"—one of my favourite programmes—this Christmas, they will see that Orpington high street is featured. I am delighted by that because it seems that the only way that one can get publicity for one's high street is when it features in a sit-com or television series. Sadly, there is a different reality because there was recently a murder and two major burglaries in the high street. That emphasises that even in the leafy suburbs crime problems worry residents, as all hon. Members know.

The Government and the Home Secretary have said many tough things in their manifesto and subsequently, including the famous soundbite,

"Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime."

The reality is very different. Resources are being cut and do not meet the demands of the police. As a consequence, in my area 10 constables' jobs have been cut this financial year. As a result of a settlement made only a week or so ago, another 10 will go next year. Two police stations, at Chislehurst and Biggin Hill, will be closed down. The Conservative Government opened a new police station at St. Mary Cray. The Government are not delivering on law and order in terms of having people on the street, reassuring the public that people are looking after the problem.

There are problems of vandalism and petty crime in my area, even though we usually avoid the big burglaries and more serious crimes that often afflict central London. I hope that the Bill can address such issues. Will it be possible for the mayor and assembly to vire—I believe that that is the technical phrase—resources from one part of the budget to another if they feel that law and order issues deserve a higher priority than they have at present? I certainly hope so.

As is probably clear to the House, I support some of the basic concepts behind the Bill. I always thought that London should have a strong voice and recognised that a mayor had the potential to embody that voice. It is important that he or she does that. However, yet again, as with the Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly, the Government have started a process without marking out a finish. Therefore, the structure that the Bill would establish is unnecessarily cumbersome and messy, and I suspect that it will be unnecessarily costly as well.

I represent an area that is on the very fringe of London—Orpington hardly considers itself part of London at all; in fact, it would rather be part of Kent, even if that meant that the people could not vote for a London mayor. To persuade such people of the value and the importance of the authority is extremely difficult. I wish that the Government had taken on board more of the commonsense, down-to-earth criticisms of the proposals that were voiced by hon. Members on both sides of the House. It would have been better had the Government's proposals been more modest and less expensive, while still giving Londoners an authority that could do the job for London that we want a mayor to do.

10.2 pm

Mr. Mike Gapes (Ilford, South): It is interesting to follow the hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam). I shall not dwell on the past, but it is interesting to note that the previous Government, having abolished the Greater London council, had a long time in which to come up with an alternative, perhaps of the sort that the hon. Gentleman now advocates, but that no such proposal was seen until 1997, when the Labour Government were elected with their pledge to bring back a strategic authority for London.

I was born in London, in the borough of Redbridge—an area slightly more inner than the area represented by my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill). I am pleased to represent Ilford and see myself as both a man of Essex—not an Essex man—and a Londoner. I believe strongly that London has to have a voice, not only as a capital city, but as an international city, one of the four or five great cities of the world in terms of its attractiveness to investors and tourists, its cultural diversity and its museums and galleries. Look at the number of people who have come from all over the world, fleeing from persecution, racism, anti-semitism and poverty, to live in London and make it one of the world's great cities.

It is an absolute disgrace that we have gone so many years without having a voice or an effective means of representation in Brussels that would enable us to get much-needed resources to London. I welcome the Bill, because it goes a considerable way towards addressing the democratic deficit that we in London have had for the past 12 years, although certain aspects could be improved. What is most important is that, at last, we have the opportunity to debate the Bill. Perhaps the media will now get away from their personality obsession with the self-publicists who publish articles and give speeches about what they will or will not do; perhaps they will now take a look at the needs of London and at the Bill.

I say that as one who has no intention whatsoever of standing as a candidate for the assembly or for mayor. However, I want to continue to represent my constituents in this place and I believe strongly that it is time that the country and the inner-London media ended their obsession with personalities and started to examine the content of the legislation that will pass through Parliament in the next few months, which aims to improve the quality of life of Londoners and address the issues that concern them.

Other hon. Members have already referred to those issues. The organisation London First, which was established to fill the gap left by the abolition of the GLC, published a briefing for Members of Parliament. I was interested to note its reference to the fact that London produces 15 per cent. of the nation's gross domestic product and contributes £14 billion a year to other parts of the country. That contribution is right if other parts of the country are poorer and we have a formula for allocating funds.

However, the briefing also points out that 13 of the 20 poorest local authority areas in the country are in London. My local authority is not one of the 13, but my constituency nevertheless contains severe pockets of deprivation, high levels of unemployment and serious social problems that are not recognised generally by the country as a whole. Unemployment levels in many London constituencies are significantly above the national average, yet other parts of the country regard this area as the wealthy south-east. I have heard people denounce what they call "capitalism" in London—and they are not talking about an economic system. It is about time that the whole United Kingdom appreciated the fact that areas of London can be as poor as parts of east Belfast, Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow, Sheffield or any other area that is represented in the House.

There are 289,000 unemployed in London at present, which is more than the totals for Scotland and Wales combined. That is very worrying as we know that the global economic crisis emanating from south Asia has disproportionate consequences for my constituents and many others who work in central London in financial and banking institutions, in insurance and in the information technology industry, which is so important to this city and to the country's economy.

The London Research Centre recently produced an important transport study of four world cities: Paris, New York, Tokyo and London. It concluded:

> "Overcrowding is an endemic problem on London's rail and underground. Lack of funding has postponed schemes, such as Crossrail, designed to alleviate central area congestion and reduce the need for interchange."

I am pleased to see that the Minister for Transport in London is in the Chamber. She will recall that I have been pushing crossrail's case in the House for the past 18 months. I represent the constituency of Ilford and I believe that crossrail from Stratford to Paddington would benefit greatly east-west communication across the city and prevent many of the interchange journeys and delays that make travelling difficult for so many people.

Reference has been made to the recent report in the *Evening Standard* about the King's Fund study, which found that Londoners were pessimistic about the health of their city. That poll revealed the priorities for change that Londoners believe a London mayor must adopt upon his election. It found that nine out of 10 Londoners believe that environmental issues are a priority, with some 57 per cent. voting for reductions in traffic, 50 per cent. for improved air quality, 27 per cent. for cleaner streets and 23 per cent. voting for improved housing.

The London authority will not have responsibility for housing; that will remain with the boroughs. That is right, but we need to consider the problems in the outer London boroughs. When I was first elected to the House, six and a half years ago, people were being placed in temporary accommodation in my borough, Redbridge, by authorities such as Westminster in central London, or Hackney and Newham in east London, because they had housing

[Mr. Mike Gapes]

shortages. There is now a general housing problem in Redbridge and my council has 200 families in bed and breakfast accommodation and is even placing people in Clacton, Southend and Westcliff-on-Sea. That is not good for the families or the children's education. We cannot easily deal with that on a borough-wide basis; we need strategic action to deal with London's serious housing problems, particularly cost.

One of London's problems—I am pleased that this is the subject of another Bill—is that it has borne a disproportionate burden of coping with the increased number of asylum applicants in recent years. I understand that about 40,000 destitute asylum seekers are being supported by London boroughs. That is not only a question of financial support; there are problems of pressures on education, social services and, again, housing.

That is important in this House and in all democratic parties in this country because unscrupulous populists and extremists might try to seize on the issue to gain support in elections for the assembly and the mayor. For that reason, I strongly disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), who spoke earlier. I believe that a 5 per cent. threshold for votes for the assembly is essential because I do not want fascist and neo-Nazi candidates to gain a foothold among the 25 places in the assembly. A 5 per cent. threshold will act as an important impediment to the development of fascist organisations in London, so it must be included in the Bill.

For similar reasons, the electoral system chosen for the mayor should be strongly supported. The advantage of the supplementary vote is that in an election that will be contested by a huge number of candidates—some serious, some not so serious, some joke candidates and some people with a single-issue agenda—it is conceivable that we could have 20, 30, 50 or 100 candidates vying for the publicity of such a high-profile role. In those circumstances, it would be extremely dangerous to have a first-past-the-post electoral system because we could end up with a victor such as those in Latin America, Georgia or other countries where articulate populists from the media circuses or extremist political groups have succeeded. The Conservative party would not gain enough votes to be in one of those categories. In a first-past-the-post election with many candidates, someone could creep to victory with a low vote, so the supplementary vote is an important democratic safeguard.

I have already mentioned the city's problems. The new transport authority for London will play an important co-ordinating role. The organisation that will be established to provide for the first time in our city a democratic accountability for the police service is long overdue. I am glad that the body is welcomed by the Metropolitan police because that demonstrates that they are forward thinking and that they believe in extending throughout the city the partnership that has been so well established with many boroughs. That is all to the good.

Many members of the assembly will spend a considerable time serving on the police authority; others will serve on the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority. For that reason, I am delighted that, in making changes between the White Paper and the Bill, Ministers have taken account of what many of us said and have decided that members should be paid. If we are to have a proper, effective and democratically functioning London authority, we need serious people with the time and commitment to do the job. It would be patently absurd if members of the Welsh Assembly received payment whereas members of the London authority did not. We have taken a step in the right direction, which is to be welcomed.

It is important that the Bill contains safeguards in respect of the mayor's accountability to the authority. The two-thirds majority provision with regard to the budget is welcome, but I hope that in Committee, we can re-examine other aspects of accountability to provide reassurance that should something go wrong, for whatever reason, and should an authoritarian or idiosyncratic person be elected as mayor, there would be no difficulty in applying the appropriate checks and balances.

We also need to make it clear in the election campaign that the Greater London authority is not GLC mark II. It is a new body; everyone knows that it is a new body, and the structures have been established to ensure that it is a new body. One of the most important is that the leader of the GLA will, in public parlance, be the democratically elected mayor. That person will have a popular mandate. It will, therefore, be impossible for anyone to come to a position of power by virtue of a change in the balance within a party group. It is very important that the public are aware of that democratic commitment and the need for a high turnout and maximum involvement in the election.

The proposals in clause 39 for a state of London address and the people's question time are an important part of the mayor's accountability. Perhaps the dome could be used for such events after the millennium.

I am also pleased that the Bill sets out a procedure whereby the deputy mayor will be appointed from among the elected members of the assembly. That is an important safeguard in the relationship between the mayor and the assembly. It will ensure that the mayor has to be sensitive to the politics of the assembly and its members.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am interested to hear the reasons that the hon. Gentleman will give for not allowing the assembly to choose the deputy mayor. What reasons will he give for allowing the mayor to have, in addition to all his other powers, the power to be in fact very insensitive to the assembly, and to choose someone of her or his preference, irrespective of the views of the assembly and, indeed, arguably, exactly contrary to the assembly's wishes?

Mr. Gapes: That issue can be explored in some detail in Committee. I do not have time to go into it now, but the important point is that an electoral system has been established whereby no single party is likely to have an overall majority in the assembly. For that reason, it will be important for the mayor to work constructively with at least two, and possibly all three or four, of the parties that have members elected to the assembly.

Two further points need greater consideration. One is the mayor's duty to consult the assembly. I do not think that it is spelt out clearly in the Bill, and I hope that it will be further considered in Committee.

Tourism is a very important part of the future development of London. Further consideration could be given to how the Greater London authority might tap some of the great revenue from tourism, which adds to

congestion on our public transport and demands on services, and offset it against other needs. Other worldwide cities are capable of that in one way or another, and we in London should consider it, too.

I very much welcome the Bill. I hope that, now there is support on both sides of the House for at least the principle of establishing democratic government in London, all parties will work together to try to ensure that it is a great success. On that basis, this city will receive the level and quality of government that it deserves.

10.21 pm

Mr. Iain Coleman (Hammersmith and Fulham): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's Second Reading debate, which marks the Government's commitment to honouring the key election pledge to set up a strategic authority for the capital and establish the post of mayor of London. I shall highlight several points in the Bill that concern transport arrangements. I should like first to welcome the functions proposed for Transport for London, as set out in clause 122.

The concept of integrating the consideration and provision of transport issues has already been taken up by the London boroughs through the formation of the Transport Committee for London. That committee, founded in January, has brought together several functions which were previously carried out by the boroughs on a Londonwide basis. The functions include parking enforcement issues and the provision of the parking appeals service, which were previously the responsibility of the Parking Committee for London; concessionary fares and the provision of door-to-door transport, which were previously the responsibility of the London Committee on Accessible Transport; the operation of London's night-time and weekend lorry ban, which was previously the responsibility of the London Boroughs Transport Committee; and the operation of London's traffic signals and traffic controls, which was previously the responsibility of the traffic controls system unit. The Transport Committee for London has already started to make changes to integrate some of the functions in order to make services more efficient and effective for Londoners. All the functions are directly relevant to the Bill.

Following the passage of the Road Traffic Act 1991, the development of parking controls and decriminalised parking enforcement has been one of the success stories in London boroughs. Since implementation of the Act in 1994 by individual boroughs and through their joint committee—now the Transport Committee for London—great improvements have been made over previous levels of enforcement and compliance with regulations, although the need for such enforcement, especially in bus lanes and on bus routes, remains a problem. I hope that the new arrangements will make progress on it.

Following enactment of the Bill, it is critical that the Greater London authority, through Transport for London, takes responsibility for parking enforcement on the new road network. I should be surprised if the mayor did not wish to use the new decriminalised form of enforcement which has worked so well in London.

The Transport Committee for London operates the parking appeals service, which has replaced the magistrates courts in considering appeals against decriminalised parking tickets. Comments in the press and a recent survey of appellants by Birmingham university have highlighted a great deal of satisfaction with the service. It would make no sense at all to set up a separate appeals body for enforcement on GLA roads. I am therefore pleased that it is intended in the Bill that the parking appeals service should continue to offer unified provision for the capital. Clause 193 achieves that by making Transport for London a member of the Transport Committee for London.

The Transport Committee for London comprises one elected member from each of the 33 London boroughs. It is therefore a little surprising that it is proposed that the body Transport for London, rather than a elected member of the assembly, is to be a member of the joint committee. The inclusion on the committee of members from each borough provides a high degree of accountability, which has been vital in ensuring that the new parking enforcement system works effectively. A representative of Transport for London would be an official with very indirect levels of accountability and, in order to ensure that the services provided continue to allow good enforcement with public acceptability, accountability is essential. In those circumstances, I urge the Government to consider the possibility of the mayor appointing an elected member of the authority—instead of an official—to the Transport Committee for London, to ensure continued accountability.

Clause 186 allows the Secretary of State to make regulation concerning concessionary fares in London. The concessionary fares system for elderly and disabled people in London provided by the London boroughs through the Transport Committee for London is currently the best in the country, providing free travel on all forms of public transport throughout Greater London after 9 am—or 9.30 am on the national railways.

That scheme was established by the GLC more than 20 years ago, initially as an off-peak free travel service on the buses, and extended in the 1980s to provide a half-fare scheme—and later a free scheme—on the London underground and a half-fare scheme on national railways within the capital. Since the scheme was taken over by the London boroughs in 1986, it has been extended to provide free travel on national railways within London—giving equality to those in south London, where there is no tube—and to cover the evening peak hours. It costs about £140 million a year.

However, the scheme is vulnerable. It must proceed on the basis of unanimity among all the boroughs, and it needs only one London borough to fail to agree with any part of the scheme to bring it down. Several times in recent years, one or two authorities—I shall not name them—have tried to blackmail the rest of the London boroughs, leading to great confusion and considerable uncertainty. For that reason, it was necessary to legislate to establish a reserve scheme, so that if, by 31 December of any year, London Transport felt that there was not agreement between the boroughs, it could institute that reserve scheme.

However, the reserve scheme is much less attractive for all the parties involved except London Transport, because it provides the benefits only of the scheme as it existed in 1984. It provides no concession on national railways, and only a half-fare scheme on London Underground. Ironically, because London Underground could set that

[Mr. Iain Coleman]

reserve scheme into motion without negotiation, it would also be able to charge more than the current voluntary arrangement through the concessionary fares scheme.

The Secretary of State might wish to consider using regulations to safeguard the existing scheme for all parties. There could be a formal duty on all the London boroughs to agree the concessionary fares scheme. That could be done by bringing it into the statutory remit of the Transport Committee for London, as all boroughs are at present required to be members of the committee. That would prevent one borough trying to blackmail the other boroughs, and holding the scheme up for ransom. Such a change would be warmly welcomed by organisations representing elderly people and people with disabilities.

The London night-time and weekend lorry ban is a further responsibility that the London boroughs inherited following the abolition of the GLC. It provides an enforceable way in which only lorries with legitimate business in London may use all but the most important roads in London at night-time and at weekends. It has provided substantial noise relief for many thousands of London residents who live alongside roads previously heavily used by juggernauts at night. In two cases, Graham road in Hackney—an especially narrow residential road—and Cheyne walk in Chelsea, the flow of heavy lorries, which was previously as heavy as 600 per hour in the 3 am to 5 am period, has been cut to a tenth of that figure, to the enormous relief of all the residents involved. The ban achieves those results without a great imposition on the freight industry, which is now on record as supporting the continuation of the ban and agreeing that there is a need to support the ban.

Following the abolition of the GLC in 1986, not all the boroughs participated in the scheme, and at one point 19 boroughs successfully kept the scheme alive. They deserve congratulation on having done so, in the face of strong opposition from some Ministers in the previous Government, who should have known better.

The formation of the Transport Committee for London has changed matters. All boroughs are now agreed in principle to support the scheme, with most actively involved, and by next April all boroughs are expected to be fully involved. We should congratulate the Transport Committee for London and the individual boroughs on supporting the ban.

That participation has led to changes in the network of excluded routes—on which any lorry may travel—being reviewed for the first time since 1984, and consideration of more flexible operation of permit conditions, and of better enforcement using new camera techniques and new technology. Those changes are being supported by the freight industry. Although it was antagonistic when the ban was first introduced, it is now on record as supporting the needs that lie behind the scheme, the review and the extension of the ban. It is a function that could be made a statutory duty on the Transport Committee for London. My right hon. Friend might like to include that duty in the Bill. That would ensure the stability of the scheme and allow it to work properly within the context of the mayor's freight transport strategy.

At this time of night I shall not detain the House any longer. I welcome the Bill and I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and his ministerial colleagues on all their hard work. I heartily welcome all the proposals that are contained in the Bill.

10.31 pm

Mr. Barry Gardiner (Brent, North): I am doubly grateful to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to speak in the debate. First, I must apologise to the House for not being in my place for the opening speeches. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction will accept that that was due to the fact that I was fulfilling a long-standing speaking engagement on his Green Paper on leasehold reform. Secondly, like you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, my accent betrays the fact that unlike many of my hon. Friends who have contributed to the debate, as well as other colleagues, I am not a native Londoner, although I speak for my constituency of Brent, North.

I am proud to represent my constituents, who live in the most ethnically diverse borough in Europe. One of the essential features of London is that diversity. In effect, London is a collection of villages which have, over time, expanded to fill the spaces between them. It is that that makes Kilburn different from Kensington and Willesden different from Westminster. I welcome that diversity and individuality which make for the richness of the city's life, but such diversity can lead to a lack of strategic thought and it is that lack of strategic thought which I believe has characterised the governance of London for the past decade. The Bill will ensure that that strategic thought is restored for the somewhat meagre cost of 3p a week per person, or £1.56 per Londoner a year. For strategic thought, £1.56 is a jolly good price to pay.

Many Members have spoken of the need for a co-ordinated transport policy. I concur with their pleas for a joined-up approach, for joined-up major routes and joined-up cycle routes that do not fizzle out at borough borders. Many Members have spoken of the need also for the London development agency to promote a strategic plan as detailed in clause 204.

I wish to emphasise that these functions of the Greater London authority are not separate. They contribute to the essential purpose of the Bill as expressed in clause 25, which is promoting economic and social development in Greater London and improving the environment.

I offer Brent as a perfect example of both the lack of strategic thought and the need to combine the powers of the LDA with the London transport authority. Such a strategic overview is essential to the economic development of our city. I can encapsulate the issue in one word: Wembley.

In the 1920s, the empire exhibition was held in the borough of Wembley. A community developed based on the economic drive that the empire exhibition created. The foundation of Wembley stadium gave another heart beating at the centre of the economic community. It was well placed for transport links, near to the London ring road and the start of the M1. Sadly, such harmony of planning, transport infrastructure and economic drive is not in evidence for the new national stadium proposals at Wembley.

Wembley Park station, which takes 55 per cent. of public access to the stadium, is decrepit. The police have to close it from time to time because it represents a danger

to those using it. I cannot say that the construction of a new access way for visitors coming to Wembley is even half finished, because it is not even half started. Yet we are looking to Wembley to be our new national stadium and the centrepiece of our 2006 World cup bid.

Wembley Central station bears 18 per cent. of those coming to the stadium, but it is more reminiscent of a 1920s—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. I know that Second Reading debates can go somewhat wide of the mark, but the hon. Gentleman must talk about the government of London rather than a specific project.

Mr. Gardiner: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I shall try to bring my remarks to the point that I want to make about the Bill. No hon. Member from London or outside would deny that a project such as Wembley is of huge strategic importance to the whole of north-west London, but that project cannot get off the ground unless the elements of the transport infrastructure are brought into harmony with the London development agency's dealings with the surrounding industrial estate. There is no point in having a jewel set in the midst of a midden. That is how developments at Wembley should have been carried out, but the strategic thought that the Bill will apply to the whole of London was lacking. It has not been possible to effect that major project with the oversight that the new London authority will be able to give.

I am delighted that clause 202 stipulates that at least half the members of the London development agency must have experience of running a business—or at least they must appear to the mayor to have such experience. In thinking strategically, we must look to how we can get the driving focus of business and the local economy to take forward major infrastructure projects. I welcome that clause.

I could not properly represent my borough of Brent without mentioning the Metropolitan police authority proposals. Brent is the most multi-ethnic borough in the country and, indeed, in Europe. Yesterday evening, a young Asian man in my constituency told me with great force that the Stephen Lawrence inquiry was the best thing that the Labour Government have done in 18 months. To be entirely honest, he said that it was the only decent thing that they had done. I remonstrated with the man on that point, but his remark about the inquiry was made forcefully, and I should like to welcome with equal force the proposals for the Metropolitan police authority, which mean that we are seeing a new democratic structure. I trust that it will bring transparency and accountability to policing in London, which many of my constituents will welcome most heartily. I welcome the Bill and wish it all speed.

10.41 pm

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): First, I apologise for being absent from the Chamber for a couple of hours. I had forewarned the Speaker's Office. Secondly, without being tempted to go down the same road or to receive the same admonition as my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner), I agree with much of what he said about the development at Wembley and the absence of a strategic dimension. I am a north-west London Member of Parliament, and the direction in which that development goes will have serious ramifications for my constituents as well.

Conservative Members, not least the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard), were utterly wrong earlier in the debate—on London transport, London Underground and congestion charges. It is a shame that she is not present, but it struck me that she had not read, or had entirely misinterpreted, the transport section of the Bill. That is a matter of profound regret, given the Bill's importance, which was highlighted admirably by my hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman).

The reasoned amendment tells us—more by exhortation than any substance—that 33 London borough leaders and a directly elected mayor are what is required. No evidence is offered to prove it, and there is no reasoned analysis of why that should be the case, just: "It's there because it's there. That's our amendment, so that's what it should be." I hope that that will be elaborated on.

The amendment also tells us that the Bill is about the diminution of London boroughs, but no evidence is offered. Most of the debate I have heard suggested nothing about diminution of their powers. I repeat what I said on Second Reading of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Act 1998 and when the White Paper was published: the measure reinforces the democratic parts of the post-GLC settlement far more readily than anything suggested in the reasoned amendment or in what I have heard from Conservative Members.

Neither is the Bill—this is suggested by mantra rather than by any point of substance—a recipe for disaster because of the relationship between the Greater London authority, the boroughs and the mayor.

Mr. Randall: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNulty: Yes, but make use of it.

Mr. Randall: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. Unfortunately, he was not able to hear some of the debate, so perhaps I can ask him the question that I asked earlier. Does he think that the GLC was strengthened by the constituency link—the borough link?

Mr. McNulty: If that was the kernel and substance of the hon. Gentleman's speech, I am rather pleased that I missed it. The debate is not about a GLC mark II and what was, by any definition, a hybrid between a glorified council and a glorified regional body. As I shall continue to say, the debate looks forward to a settlement on London's governance for the new millennium. I say with all due respect to the hon. Gentleman that we should not hark back to old stories, whether in English, Serbo-Croat or any other language. The Bill moves us on from Baroness Thatcher's spiteful vandalism in 1986.

We—by which I mean London; I am not speaking in a partisan way—need vision and leadership for the millennium and beyond; we need not historical throwbacks to the mid-1980s, but a new, modernised and reinvigorated leadership and vision to take London, our city, into the next century. The Bill provides a voice and a government for our London in the 21st century.

I shall dwell briefly on some of the Bill's key points, although I hasten to add that, even at this hour, I am using my definition of briefly, not anyone else's. I said on Second Reading of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill that London's future prosperity and

[Mr. McNulty]

success would depend on the way in which the new architecture of governance for London worked. That remains the case. However large this Bill is, it cannot legislate for and foresee the shape of and the basic relationships between all aspects of the new governance of London in 10 or 15 years. Anyone who thinks that the Bill can or should do that has little understanding of the modern world.

The relationship between the mayor, the Greater London authority and the boroughs is crucial. By definition, the new architecture of governance for London will evolve and grow. The strategic powers in the Bill will mean that we are not creating a reincarnated GLC. That is not to say that the GLC was dreadful, and that we do not want to reinvent it. By the mid-1980s, what the GLC was doing was broadly fine. As many of my hon. Friends—not least my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell)—who were not Members of Parliament at the time have said, the GLC needed serious reform, not spiteful abolition; it was necessary to re-engage the boroughs with what they should have been doing, and the strategic authority with what it should have been doing.

The new architecture that is rooted in the Bill will evolve as the strategic confidence of London grows. That confidence has been ripped out for the past 12 years; some would say—it is a subject for a chat in the Tea Room rather than for this debate—that it was ripped out way before then. Some parts of the GLC's activities were far from strategic; it was doing things that should have been done by the boroughs.

As I also said on Second Reading of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, London needs a strong elected focal point, which a citywide mayor will provide. The voting method for the mayor is sound; it will produce a mayor with a strong mandate. I shall not get lost among the quibbles about what happens when only the top two candidates are left, but I do not accept the premise that that would undermine the legitimacy or strength of the mayoral mandate.

The proposed election system for constituency members and London members of the assembly is appropriate; the Bill demonstrates the strength of a proper use of election systems. We do not need shibboleths; we do not want people saying, "The system must be this one, because it is as pure as driven snow; it is the most perfect and moral." The starting point for choosing an electoral system must be what is appropriate for the elements of government to which one wants to elect people.

The combination of constituency members and London members—to use the Bill's jargon—is also appropriate. I profoundly disagree with those hon. Members who suggested that the 5 per cent. cut-off was wrong. Experience of continental systems shows that the 5 per cent. cut-off is crucial. If hon. Members do not believe that, they should remember what happened in the Isle of Dogs, when some parties—I could mention the Liberal Democrats—lost the plot about what constituted racist literature, although I shall not go into that now.

The two-thirds veto on the budget is an important safeguard, and the relationship between the mayor and the assembly will evolve and develop within the strategic legislative framework proposed by the Bill. Contrary to what some of my hon. Friends have suggested—perish the thought that we would disagree—the power of recall for the mayor is a total red herring. The notion that somehow, given the uniqueness of the mayor's position, there needs to be some form of recall is nonsense.

No one talks about the power of recall for Members of Parliament—perhaps they should. If, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) suggested, Members of Parliament were to become idiosyncratic—perish the thought—no one would say, "Let us have a petition in Ilford, South and get rid of him." They would say, "Come the next election, he's out." That is entirely appropriate for the mayor. Having a recall as some sort of get-out clause would fundamentally undermine the powers of the assembly, of Londoners and of the mayor.

It is time for the London and national media to start to take seriously a major development for this country, and not just this great city. I am bound to say that, to date, by covering a serious political development almost as a beauty contest—with unendorsed individuals posing as party candidates and rushing for the latest photo opportunity—the media have fundamentally let down London and Londoners. Where is the debate?

Mr. Burstow: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. McNulty: Only if it is good.

Mr. Burstow: I shall endeavour to honour that request. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the Bill ought to include some specific provisions to enable the election expense rules to apply from the point at which people declare their prospective candidacies—and, indeed, start campaigning, as a number of Members of this place and elsewhere appear to have done so far?

Hon. Members: What about the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes)?

Mr. McNulty: I think the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) meant serious candidates. To give him his due, that is a fair point—in the context of the Mickey Mouse contest that we are having now. If I thought seriously that this was the start of what ultimately will be the contest between the candidates in May 2000, he would have a more serious point. In general terms, that matter must be addressed—not least because the essence of some of the American models was all about going out and buying a mayoralty with the individual funding of particular people. That was wrong. That was a good point—I will give the hon. Gentleman that one.

In terms of the London and national media, where is the debate about the future vision for London? Where is the debate about the strategy that London should be taking, on a cross-party basis, into the 21st century? It is not there. It is about who can pose with Puss-in-Boots last and look best, which has let down London by offering nothing about what London needs from the mayor and the assembly.

We need more than putative Tory candidates suddenly developing—out of nowhere, almost—concern for London; concern that is far too late to be taken seriously, and far too two-faced to be treated with anything other

than contempt. That is the case whether it is a Tory candidate who does not know his arts from his elbow and does not know fact from fiction; or a gallivanting spiv who sells second-hand cars—a putative Dick Whittington, whose experience shows that he owes more to the first name of that illustrious mayor than to the second.

Surely Londoners deserve better from the media and from the candidates concerned. It is essential throughout what is left of the run-up to the first mayoral election that all parties have grown-up processes to select their mayoral and assembly candidates—processes that reflect London's diversity and are as inclusive as possible. To take far wider the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North, London by its nature is a rich and varied community. More than 35 per cent. of its electorate are black or Asian in origin. That must be reflected across all parties in the mayoral or assembly candidates if Londoners are to take us seriously as politicians and as political parties.

In general, business welcomes the Bill's proposals, as do the traffic professionals, with whom the right hon. Member for South–West Norfolk had so much difficulty. Despite what was suggested on Second and Third Reading of the Greater London Authority (Referendum) Bill, the police fully accept the proposals. Everyone accepts them, except the Tories, who seem simply not to understand the notion of strategic governance or what London needs for the future, and the Liberals, who as ever play whingeing schoolboy games. They are loaded with pomposity and divorced from reality, and think that they are playing with a little Lego set rather than a vital element of our constitution.

There are key elements of genuine concern that could have been brought out far better in the debate in the media and in the House, but the overall provisions of the Bill are to be welcomed. As someone who served for 11 years on a borough planning committee and for about four years—it seemed longer—on the London planning advisory committee, I accept that some greater clarity may be needed on the specific planning proposals in clauses 226 to 241, but I do not believe, from my reading of the Bill, that they are loaded against the boroughs, or that we will have a nasty GLC mark II that is inherently anti-development and will try to stop areas of London doing what they want.

The key to the spatial development strategy is the word "strategy". The relationship between borough unitary development plans, the spatial development strategy and the role of the mayor will pan out in the appropriate fashion. Concerns about borough planning powers are misplaced.

To those who have the pleasure of being on the Committee—that is a plea not to be on it, I hasten to add—it will become clear that the spatial development strategy, the London development agency strategy and the transport strategy must be pulled together if they are to prove effective.

The architecture of governance for London outlined in the Bill will allow London to be a key international city for the future, with, I hope, mayoral candidates and assembly members for the future. That new governance, representing all of London, will give us all faith and confidence, and a strategic vision rooted in democracy for Londoners. That democracy and strategic vision are long, long overdue.

10.57 pm

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), who laid great emphasis on the word "strategy". That is the word that one uses when one does not really know what to do; hence "strategic rail authority", when the Government have no policy of their own on the railways. It was a bit rich for my right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) to be lectured by the hon. Gentleman, who said that she did not understand the Bill's provisions for transport, when it became increasingly obvious during the Secretary of State's speech that he did not understand what to do with the tube.

We have heard much about the functions of the proposed authority and the conflicts that might arise. There were interesting contributions from Government Members about the voting system and whether open lists should be introduced. I wonder whether we will have a re-run of the European Parliamentary Elections Bill on that issue. There were many contributions from Opposition Members—not only Conservative Members—about hypothecation of road charges, and I will return to that later.

It is something of a privilege for me to be at the Dispatch Box tonight. I think that I am the only Front Bencher from any party who has spoken for his party on the Scotland Bill, the Government of Wales Bill and now the Greater London Authority Bill. Such is the serendipity of politics. Speaking as someone born of Scottish parents, with a Welsh name and born a Londoner, perhaps I am qualified to do so, however. By a further irony, my wife's grandmother turned on the lights of the Greater London council in the building that is now an aquarium, and my father turned them out. I take great pride in both actions.

The Queen's Speech referred to the need to help to make London a world-class city. If it is the Government's policy to approach the establishment of a Greater London authority on the basis that London is not already a world-class city, that might explain the absence of media interest in this debate to which the hon. Member for Harrow, East referred. The Bill presents the potential for a vast new layer of bureaucracy. There is a strong case for a mayor in a co-ordinating role, but the Bill proposes a huge panoply of powers and duties. As my right hon. Friend the Member for South–West Norfolk pointed out, the Bill is twice as long as the Scotland Bill, which has far more constitutional significance.

The composition of powers on transport for London contains not the prospect of integration, but the danger of conflict. Everything done by the boroughs can be second-guessed by the mayor under clause 131, and everything done by the mayor can be second-guessed by the Secretary of State under clause 124. As usual, the Government are trying to have it both ways. They pretend to be in favour of genuine devolution, but allow the control-freak mentality of Ministers to maintain ultimate control over everything.

The research conducted by the London chamber of commerce showed that business sees transport as the priority issue for the mayor, and that point was echoed by many hon. Members tonight. Once again, the Government are trying to have it both ways, which is leading to the dither and delay that have become a feature of the Government's transport policy. Over all looms the

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presence of the Treasury, which remains the ever-present ghost at the feast of any transport debate under this Government.

The Bill is a two-headed beast on transport. The new transport authority for London will be vested with huge powers and a glance at schedule 9 shows that all the panoply of powers of the existing transport authorities—to own transport, to operate vehicles and transport services, to finance and to subsidise—will be transferred to the new authority. Schedule 9, paragraph 14(2)(a), even contains provisions giving powers to own and develop property for completely unrelated, unconnected purposes. Extraordinarily, paragraph 8(1) will give the new authority the power to manufacture and repair spare parts. The new authority will have powers to do everything bar renationalising privatised industries. The Bill has all the hallmarks of old Labour, but it is also new Labour.

New Labour wants all the benefits of privatisation. In particular, it wants access to private capital, but none of its disciplines. That unlikely mixture of old and new Labour is behind the PPP—the private partnership—

Ms Glenda Jackson: The public-private partnership.

Mr. Jenkin: It is not surprising that I am confused. The game was given away when the Minister of Transport gave evidence to the Transport Sub-Committee of the Environment, Transport and the Regions Select Committee. Instead of referring to the public-private partnership of the National Air Traffic Services, he inadvertently referred to privatisation, which is the one word that he was not meant to say.

The public-private partnership is part of the new Labour third way and is an extraordinary mixture of old and new Labour. The sub-committee described the Government's proposals for the tube as "rather a convoluted compromise". That has led to dither and delay and left the Secretary of State with no policy at all.

The order of events has been curious during the run-up to the Greater London authority, particularly as regards congestion charging and transport policy. Usually, Governments produce a consultation paper, then a White Paper and then a Bill, before the funding is put in place if that has not been done already. However, the third way—that mixture of old and new Labour—meant that we began with manifesto commitments that bore little relation to reality. Then there was a year's delay, and then the funding was rather unfairly settled when the Secretary of State lost his battle in the comprehensive spending review. The tube subsidy is to be cut by 2000, as the Secretary of State confirmed today. The revenue subsidy will be phased out and new revenues of up to £1 billion a year from non-residential parking charges, congestion charges and road tolls are assumed by 2005.

After the funding came the transport White Paper in July. Then there was the U-turn on the tube, and then came the Greater London Authority Bill, which contains powers for congestion charging and non-residential parking charges. Finally, the Government produced a consultation paper to prove that they had not made up their minds on how the money should be collected, who should pay, who should be exempt and how much people should pay. All that is yet to be decided, and the most important city in the United Kingdom is to be the guinea pig for an experiment.

The financing of transport in London—particularly that of the tube—is in a state of chaos. The Secretary of State did not help to resolve the confusion when he spoke this afternoon. He first admitted that it was assumed that the public-private partnership would replace tube funding by 2000. How can that be? How can capital raised from the private sector replace a revenue subsidy provided by the public sector? It is a complete mystery.

The interesting word in the Secretary of State's speech was "assumed". He spoke in the past tense. He obviously no longer makes that assumption. He was at great pains to emphasise that there was no deadline for the public-private partnership of the tube. I believe that he was conducting a negotiation with someone not in the House, and that person must, of course, be the Treasury. By agreeing to the abolition of the tube subsidy by 2000, the Treasury has set a deadline. What will the Secretary of State do to replace the funding? Is the tube really expected to become self-financing in 2000? Perhaps the Minister can tell us.

When the Secretary of State said that there was no deadline, he meant that the Treasury had already set one. The Treasury has him over a barrel. Once again, the Chancellor has stitched up the Secretary of State. That explains the Government U-turn on the transfer of the tube to the Greater London authority. The *Financial Times* was briefed by an un-named Minister as follows:

> "The chances are that candidates would campaign on a platform of blocking the sale. That would have been a disaster."

Note the word "sale". It is not the correct word. It should have been "public-private partnership".

All that explains the urgency of using London as the test bed for the congestion charging experiment, which is the Secretary of State's fall-back position. It is the only option that the Chancellor has left the Secretary of State. The new revenues are to replace cuts in subsidy on the tube.

Mr. Raynsford: Wrong again.

Mr. Jenkin: If that is wrong, I look forward to hearing the Minister's explanation. The whole question of hypothecation of revenues remains open.

Mr. Wilkinson: My hon. Friend is making a most important point. What the Government are doing is central to their approach and typical of new Labour. They propose to clobber the motorist and the employer with their new charges rather than making London's transport the fantastic service that it could have been with proper privatisation that would have given people an incentive to use it. We are getting the worst of both worlds.

Mr. Jenkin: My hon. Friend is right. He was also right to point out that parking charges will place an extra burden on employers. Those are extra taxes, which the Confederation of British Industry has roundly condemned. Again, it is new Labour: old Labour. New Labour is meant to be friends with the CBI, but old Labour, which raises taxes, is rapidly falling out with that organisation.

That raises the question of hypothecation, the constant claim of the Secretary of State since he produced the White Paper in the summer, but it is completely at odds with parts of the document "Breaking the Logjam", which was produced earlier this week, and with parts of the legislation.

The Bill is clear. We have already discussed schedules 13 and 14. It includes a provision

"requiring a charging authority to pay a prescribed proportion of the net proceeds . . . to the Secretary of State",

and any sums received by the Secretary of State will be paid into the Consolidated Fund.

The Bill does not conform to what the Government are saying. If they are serious about their pledge, let them put it in the legislation. Of course, they cannot do so because they have lost the argument with the Treasury. They protest and cite the 10-year pledge. That pledge, which is in "Breaking the Logjam", reads:

"The Government therefore proposes that local authorities which bring forward pilot road user charging schemes should be able to retain 100 per cent. of the net revenue generated for at least 10 years".

The operative word there is "should". The Treasury prevented the Government from putting in "will" because it has not agreed. The explanation is given a little further on in the document:

"This is because there could be poor value for money if low priority transport projects were undertaken simply because of restrictions on the use of revenues."

There we hear the silky voice of the Treasury mandarins, who are determined to ensure that the principle of hypothecation is a buck that they do not pass.

Interestingly, paragraph 3.16 of the document, gives the value added tax implications. We read:

"Action is currently being taken by the European Commission against the UK . . . for not levying VAT at the standard rate . . . on road and bridge tolls."

We read this in a document produced by a Government who deny that tax harmonisation is on the agenda of the European Union. It also underlines the fact that, when they lose that case—as they probably will—a large proportion of the revenues from congestion tolls, charges and parking taxes will go to the Treasury, at least in the form of VAT. If that is to be denied, why do they not put that provision in the Bill?

Mr. Gapes: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that it was a Conservative Government who made it possible for the European Commission to talk about VAT in that way? Before the Conservatives took that action, it would not have been possible.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We are not debating that subject. We should return to London.

Mr. Jenkin: I shall carry on with my speech, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Parking levies and congestion charges are just another tax. Tube financing is in a mess. There is no certainty or time scale, there are no deadlines and the money will run out in 2000, so the new taxes are the only option. If I am wrong, perhaps the Minister will guarantee at the Dispatch Box that none of the new revenues will be used to finance the tube, which has always been the responsibility of central Government. I shall give way to the hon. Lady if she would like to give that guarantee. No, it appears she will not take up that offer.

That is why the new taxes are destined to be unpopular. In Oslo—

Ms Buck: I am slightly confused. The hon. Gentleman makes a point about the new taxes but, as I said earlier, Westminster Conservatives want their right to introduce a congestion tax to be considered urgently. Does that make them old or new Labour?

Mr. Jenkin: I am not responsible for Westminster council. Given the way in which the Government have ripped the grant away from that council, totally unjustifiably, it is understandable that it should want to raise resources elsewhere. The hon. Lady should be under no illusions: it is the loot that the council wants to get its hands on. That is its main priority.

The new taxes are destined to be unpopular. In Oslo, road charges were introduced with a clear and visible link, so that those paying them could see the benefits that they were gaining. When Austria attempted to introduce road pricing without such a clear link, a successful campaign called "Road pricing? Nein danke!" stopped the proposals in their tracks.

The real question is how much will be paid in London. The Leicester experiment suggested that motorists would have to pay £6 a day to be sufficiently deterred in order to get out of their cars and use public transport. In London, the figure would have to be higher because the distances are greater; everything is on a greater scale. That underlines that this is just another tax.

It adds insult to those who have to travel by car that fuel duties have been increased by £9 billion on top of Conservative plans over the lifetime of this Parliament. The motorist already pays £31 billion in motoring taxation, and hardly one fifth is spent on transport. That proportion is set to fall. Now the Government produce yet more taxes and burdens on the motorist. This would truly be a poll tax on wheels—but to call it that is unfair, because at least the primary legislation gave the poor an exemption from the poll tax. The increased costs of motoring hit the most vulnerable driver groups the hardest. Those are also the fastest growing driver groups: low-paid workers; women with second cars; disabled people; and pensioners, for whom a car is one of the last luxuries that they want to have to give up.

By tackling urban congestion, the Government are tackling the wrong target. To reduce traffic growth, they would need to tackle inter-urban congestion. Inner urban traffic is hardly growing and suburban traffic is growing a bit. The main growth is inter-urban traffic, from where the main increase in pollution and congestion will come. The proposals hardly bother with that.

The problem with London traffic, especially in central London, is that it has long been at saturation point. To a certain extent, congestion is self-regulating. Charges can change its nature—there would be fewer Metros and Citroen 2CVs for the convenience of people who can pay with impunity, and more Jaguars and Rolls-Royces—but it is most likely that there would still be saturation. That may mean that congestion in Hampstead high street remains much the same.

The charges are simply new taxes. They have nothing to do with congestion or the environment and everything to do with politicians wanting to get their hands on the loot. In the Secretary of State's case, it is about rescuing him from his own incompetence in his negotiations on the tube and with the Treasury in the public spending round.

The solution to the problem of the tube is to privatise it, which would raise serious capital. Instead, the Government are going in for the most desperate sort of

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briefing. *The Sunday Telegraph* suggested that the Secretary of State is planning a £5 billion integration of the tube and the railways. What an irony it would be if the most hotly disputed privatisation of all, rail privatisation, ended up with the newly privatised Railtrack riding to the rescue of a Government who oppose privatisation in principle and continue to oppose it for London Underground.

Where are the plans really coming from? Are the Government just kite-flying so as to distract attention from their own mess? What studies have been carried out into the proposals? What is the real feasibility of running British Rail trains through parts of the circle line? What is the time scale for the introduction of the proposals? What are the implications for the crossrail project? Is crossrail now dead? Has the City been told that the Government have abandoned crossrail? What are the costs of the proposals? Whence is the funding to come? What does Railtrack get in return? The public-private partnership for the tube has no timetable. Tube policy has become a train that lacks even a time for departure, let alone a clear destination.

The Bill does nothing for transport in London. It fiddles with structures and bodies instead of policy. It pays off the ransoms of past political hostages to fortune, instead of laying real plans for the benefit of Londoners. The Bill will not generate one extra penny for transport in London, except by placing extra burdens on motorists. The Government will learn, once again, that it is one thing to raise expectations, but quite another to fulfil them. The Scotland Act 1998 raised huge expectations, but in the end it only increased the nationalist vote. The Government of Wales Act 1998 has set members of the Labour party at each other's throats. In London, the ghosts of the GLC will return to haunt the Labour Government.

11.20 pm

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): The hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin) spoke at great length about strategy, but if we accept his definition of what constitutes "strategic"—a lack of policies—we can see that he is a member of a comprehensively strategic party. He went on to give the House the most fantastic interpretation of Government policy, but I shall concentrate on the two issues to which he attached enormous importance in the course of weaving his web—talk about smoke and glass!

Let me nail the fallacy that the Government have reduced investment in London Underground. It was the previous Administration who, in the 1996 Budget, made cuts to London Underground funding of £130 million. They proposed, on the basis of their remaining in office, to increase that cut in the 1998-99 Budget to £248 million; and in the 1999-2000 Budget, to increase it yet again, to a total of £378 million. The Labour Government found, in one Budget, an additional £365 million for investment in London Underground, thus ensuring that, over two years, London Underground had £1 billion for investment. The hon. Gentleman appears to be unclear about the purpose of Government investment in the underground, thinking that it is for revenue; in fact, it is, as it has always been, essentially for capital investment.

The hon. Gentleman moved on to the public-private partnership—a phrase he had some difficulty in remembering and saying. There has been no Government U-turn. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister made it abundantly clear this afternoon that we have learnt the appalling lesson of rail privatisation and that we have no intention of going down that track, which caused such a vast waste of public money—millions and millions of pounds. Vast amounts of public money still have to be poured into the privatised rail service, yet the service still fails to meet the high standards that the people of this country expect.

A public-private partnership is on track—I hate to use that phrase. As my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister said, he is not offering any opportunities—we are talking about competitive bids. Unlike the previous Government in respect of rail privatisation, we shall not be tied to or driven by a date or timetable that brings in its train an appalling level of service and vast sums of public money having to be poured into our railways.

The hon. Member for North Essex referred to a story in *The Sunday Telegraph* of 13 December. The suggestion that Railtrack has been chosen as the sole bidder for a project of the sort described is entirely untrue. The Government have no plans whatsoever to privatise the underground. We made it abundantly clear in our manifesto that that was not our way forward. Our way forward is a public-private partnership. If the hon. Gentleman has serious questions to ask—judging by his speech this evening, he has neither serious thoughts nor serious questions—they would be better addressed to the journalists of *The Sunday Telegraph* who wrote that piece of fantasy.

I share with many of my hon. Friends—I am sure that those who did not say so feel it too—a sense of pride in the fact that the Bill has been delivered to the Floor of the House. It is another example of the Government keeping their promises—and in this instance, they made a promise to Londoners. The official Opposition have made several U-turns on this policy. They heralded it initially as an appalling idea. However, when they saw how popular it was with Londoners, they decided that it was not so appalling after all. Some Conservative Members have claimed tonight that the mayor will have too many powers, while others have claimed that he or she will have too few. Conservative Members are clearly not committed to restoring a democratic voice for London—but that is hardly surprising since the Conservatives took that voice away in the first place.

The right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) spoke at great length about her concerns regarding the assembly's lack of accountability, transparency and powers. She was concerned about a proliferation of bodies and she dubbed Londoners "guinea pigs". Londoners voted overwhelmingly for the proposals that we are debating this evening. It is entirely typical of the Conservatives—who have little respect for Londoners—that, when Londoners get what they have argued and campaigned for, the shadow spokesperson should dub them "guinea pigs".

The right hon. Lady expressed concern about environmental targets. The mayor will have a responsibility in that area, and I direct the right hon. Lady's attention to part IX, clause 242 onwards, of the Bill. She was not the only Member to argue this evening that the mayor should be removed by some means other than the vote of the electorate. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) and the

hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) also expressed that view. We believe in the intelligence, perspicacity and political sophistication of the people of London and we believe that they should decide when to remove the mayor.

Several themes surfaced this evening from all sides—

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the Minister give way?

Ms Jackson: I regret that I will not give way as we are rather pressed for time. I think that the hon. Gentleman has had more than his fair share of interventions.

Several themes recurred throughout the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, East referred to tax-varying powers. We have made it abundantly clear that there will be no such powers as far as the London mayor and assembly are concerned. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey made exactly the same reference, and I reiterate my previous point.

Taxation was a particular concern to several hon. Members on both sides of the House, so I shall take this opportunity to reassert our position and, I hope, calm the fears of the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait)—who I regret is not in her place. She was particularly concerned about taxation, which she said would inevitably increase. I can well understand her point of view, as the previous Conservative Administration raised taxes 22 times after giving a clear commitment before the general election that they would not do so.

As I have said already this evening, approximately 3p a week will be added to band D council tax. The contribution that Londoners will make towards the cost of the mayor and the assembly is about one fifth of the £20 million a year that we estimate the mayor, the assembly and its staff will cost. Council tax payers will continue to contribute to the cost of policing, fire services and other Londonwide services when the GLA takes over.

There are proposals in the Local Government Bill for reserve powers to limit excessive council tax increases. That was referred to by the hon. Member for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman), who reiterated the fear that Londoners would be asked to pay more and more for the GLA. The Local Government Bill will prevent the GLA's precept from increasing unacceptably. That was one of the issues that was raised with what I shall not go so far as to call boring regularity by Conservative Members, and I hope that my remarks will calm their fears.

Mr. Simon Hughes: The hon. Lady paid tribute to Londoners' perspicacity, wisdom, political sophistication and sagacity, which will allow them to choose a mayor who would not ever be in danger of being recalled. If they are so wise, why cannot they have an authority with powers that they can vary, rather that one that is controlled by the Secretary of State?

Ms Jackson: They voted overwhelmingly for our proposals for a directly elected mayor and a separately elected assembly. It would be wrong twice to overturn the democratic decision of Londoners, which the hon. Gentleman's proposals would undoubtedly do.

My hon. Friends the Members for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock), for Romford (Mrs. Gordon), for Ilford, North (Ms Perham) and for Regent's Park and Kensington, North (Ms Buck) all raised in their individual ways issues that they and their constituents believe are particularly important—deprivation, unemployment, the environment and crime. They spoke of issues that matter to the people of London and which the authority will be empowered to begin to tackle strategically for the whole of London. The Bill contains powers on the environment, biodiversity and other issues mentioned by—I have to say, in fairness—hon. Members on both sides of the House.

Conservative Members have raised the issue of how much of the revenue raised by congestion charging and the levy on private non-residential parking will be spent by the mayor and the assembly, and the boroughs when they have those powers, on improving transport in London. I repeat, for what must be the fifth time, that every penny raised by those levies will be spent where it is raised to improve transport. The money will be used to implement the mayor's integrated transport strategy. That will be the case outside London when powers for the remainder of the country are introduced.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I respect and admire the way in which the hon. Lady has made that commitment. Would she be prepared to move an amendment in Committee to remove paragraph 15(5) of schedule 13, which says:

"Any sums received by the Secretary of State under the regulations or a charging scheme shall be paid into the Consolidated Fund"?

Ms Jackson: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman was not in his place when I dealt with that issue.

Sir Sydney Chapman: I was.

Ms Jackson: I believe that he was not. I dealt with that issue when the point was made about the number of times that that suggestion has been put to the House. I made it clear that we are listening to what he and other hon. Members have said. I repeat: every penny raised will be spent on improving transport in the area where it is raised.

I refute the other canard, which emanated from the hon. Member for North Essex, who wound up for the Opposition, that there was a battle with the Treasury which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State lost. The Government—a united Government—have broken the barrier of hypothecation. The Conservatives did propose this kind of tax-raising powers in their transport paper, but there was never any mention of hypothecation in this connection. We have broken that particular barrier, as we are breaking so many other barriers which the Conservatives may have talked about but on which they significantly failed to act.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Ms Jackson: No, I will not.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, North shared my pride in the Bill. She spoke of the cultural dimension that can be introduced by the strategic authority. The House would have been amazed if she had not raised the

[Ms Jackson]

issue of black cabs, but she did. Again, she welcomed the wider transport strategy that the mayor and the assembly will introduce.

Mr. Jenkin: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. Would she recommend that a Labour mayoral candidate stood for election on the platform of introducing congestion charges?

Ms Jackson: If I understood the question correctly, clearly my answer would be yes. It was part of our White Paper that such charges would be introduced; the Prime Minister said in a statement at our conference in Blackpool that the mayor would have the necessary powers; and I have outlined six times tonight precisely how the moneys will be spent. I have made it abundantly clear that it is one of the modernising successes of the Government that we have broken the shibboleth of hypothecation and that a united Government will ensure that this particular revenue stream will be directed to improving transport in London. Improving transport in London will inevitably and invariably improve the environment in London.

Mr. Lansley: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for her courtesy in giving way. Will she go further than the guarantee about hypothecation and say that the Government will guarantee that the moneys raised through user charges for transport will be additional moneys?

Ms Jackson: Yes, we have always made it abundantly clear that that is the case. It is one way of accurately directing moneys raised from a specific source to make improvements for everyone in that particular area. I would like the record to show that when Opposition Members ask such questions, the answers that I give clearly do not meet with their approval, so they are clearly opposed to congestion charges and even more opposed to the moneys raised being spent where they are raised to improve transport, reduce congestion and improve the environment. *[Interruption.]* From a sedentary position, the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey said, "Speak for the Conservatives." I am of course excluding the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues from that particular criticism. There are other criticisms that I could and would make of them, but the hour is getting late.

Mr. Lansley: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it in order for the hon. Lady to say that Conservative Members disagreed that these moneys should be additional, when none of us was expressing such a view?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: These matters are points of debate. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman can at some point rebut the case that the hon. Lady is making, but the hon. Lady is perfectly in order.

Ms Jackson: If I misread the hon. Gentleman's face, I apologise, but he looked very disappointed by my answer.

The hon. Member for Ruislip–Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson), who I regret is not in his place, made a point that underlined the need for a strategic mayor and assembly. Other hon. Members made the point in their own way and asked that the 33 London boroughs be represented on the assembly, arguing that the boroughs represented exclusively the interests of Londoners. The hon. Gentleman highlighted that because he was not especially excited about the link between Hillingdon and Ealing. He referred to a partiality for or commitment to a particular area, but we believe—the people of London have supported us in this belief—that one can live in Hillingdon, Ealing, Hampstead and Highgate or Greenwich and have a strong commitment to one's own area but undoubtedly also have the sense of being a Londoner. That point was made cogently by my hon. Friend the Member for Upminster (Mr. Darvill). It is important to have a strategic authority so that we may reflect the sense of what it means to have a commitment to London and to be a Londoner. A strategic authority will lift us out of the undoubted requirement for the boroughs to fight their own corners.

In a very detailed, interesting and cogently worked speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) welcomed the Bill and paid a generous tribute to my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister and my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction, for which I—and I am sure they—would wish to thank him.

I have touched on the issue of taxation, which was raised by the hon. Member for Beckenham. She also raised the issue of the power to create a police authority, which is of course of particular importance. Every other metropolitan authority in the country has such an authority, yet London has been deprived of one. The proposed police authority has been very much welcomed by Londoners.

Points were made on police funding. The hon. Member for Orpington (Mr. Horam) said that we had cut it. On 21 July, the Home Secretary announced that the police service will receive an additional £1.24 billion over three years from 1999-2000. That is in addition to the £7 billion a year already spent on policing. Our plans are to allow for police expenditure to increase by 2.7 per cent. in 1999 to 2000, a further 2.8 per cent. in 2000 to 2001 and an extra 4 per cent. in 2001 to 2002. Of course, police authorities will be able to increase spending by delivering services more efficiently. I hope that that sets at rest any fears that hon. Members may have had about our proposals for a police authority.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romford spoke of her pride in this Government delivering our promises to London. She highlighted the importance of a strategic approach to transport for pensioners and people with disabilities, and raised the issues of those who have an orange badge. As I am sure she is aware, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee is the statutory body that advises the Government on that matter. She also raised the issue of minicabs and taxis. She welcomed the Bill not least for the very important mayoral powers on the environment and waste management.

The hon. Member for Uxbridge (Mr. Randall) made a point about constituency ties. He missed the point that I made earlier that, although all Londoners have strong ties to their own areas, they also have a strong sense of what it is to be a Londoner. He found my post-referendum

statements that Londoners had voted overwhelmingly for a mayor and an assembly curious. I did not find them quite as curious as the previous Conservative Government's view, under the Housing Act 1988, that those who fail to vote should be counted as a vote against. That is a rather curious way of supporting those who exercise a sense of civic duty in voting in elections.

My hon. Friend the Member for Regent's Park and Kensington, North highlighted the fact that we have kept our promise. In common with my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East (Mr. McNulty), she made the point that we are not looking back. This is not the GLC mark II. We are moving forward; this is a modern form of government to welcome the millennium.

The hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) welcomed the Bill. He highlighted what he regarded as a rather small figure in the referendum, saying that there had been no excitement about it on the doorsteps in his constituency. A recurring theme that I heard on the doorsteps was, "Who in their right mind would want to vote against a mayor and assembly?" London has been arguing for it ever since its democratic voice was so spitefully taken away. He referred to "Prescott capping", which of course equates with best value—best value in every sense of the word. *[Interruption.]* I rather think that they do, but the hour is getting late, and as we have already had an example of how dangerous it is to attempt to read facial expressions, I shall move on to the next point. I hope that I have managed to calm the hon. Gentleman's fears regarding congestion charging.

Mrs. Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest): On the point that the hon. Lady has just made about those who have voted in the referendum for the Greater London authority, will she undertake, on behalf of the Government, to protect those people—such as my constituents—who depend on London services such as the underground, who did not have a vote in the referendum and will not have a vote for the Greater London authority or for the mayor, but who will depend entirely on decisions taken by the Greater London authority?

Ms Jackson: I shall forgive the hon. Lady her audacity in asking for the protection of underground services, given that she represents a party that had 18 years in which to improve those services, significantly failed so to do, and would have been, had it been returned at the last general election, engaged in a process of running down those services so that they could be sold off. I shall forgive her on that level.

However, let me assure—indeed, reassure—the hon. Lady that our public-private partnership is a way of attracting into the underground vast amounts of money which could not possibly come from the public purse, to ensure that it is not only maintained, but modernised. I am speaking of the whole underground network. We have no plans—as, I believe, the Conservative party had in its previous Administration—to close a third of the lines before attempting to sell the underground.

The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) made three points. He said that he did not perceive that London had any particular political identity. I am prepared to forgive him for that remark, which is insulting to Londoners. They are clear in their minds that London does have a political identity. For a long time, they have been arguing for their voice to be restored to them.

The hon. Gentleman spoke of lack of clarity on planning. Given the failure of previous Administrations to do anything other than regard planning as a dirty word, and given the absurd, ad hoc nature of planning in London—Canary wharf is a prime example—I believe that what we are proposing, strategically, is precisely what London wants. I reassure the hon. Gentleman that the business community does welcome the GLA, not least to provide a strategic voice to sort out London's transport problems.

My hon. Friend the Member for Upminster spoke of the sense of being a Londoner. He too congratulated our right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. I was especially interested that he shared the Government's commitment to ensuring that the River Thames—that vast natural resource, which runs through this great capital city—is brought back to life and plays its proper part.

I mentioned the contribution by the hon. Member for Orpington, especially on the subject of crime and the police. We absolutely share his commitment to the idea of world squares.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes) also welcomed the Bill. I tell him, and other hon. Members who were concerned about the proposed threshold, that the level of the threshold will be decided by a statutory instrument via an affirmative resolution. That is clearly something that must be discussed in detail, and that is what we are committed to doing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hammersmith and Fulham (Mr. Coleman) spoke of the Transport Committee for London. I am sure that it was a slip of the tongue when he referred to the vulnerability of concessionary fares. There is no possibility of concessionary fares becoming vulnerable either before or after the creation of the GLA. My hon. Friend spoke of the importance of the London lorry ban. It was something for which Londoners had argued for a considerable time, which they eventually won.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brent, North (Mr. Gardiner) spoke of joined-up transport, which will undoubtedly be part of what the mayor will be approaching. We welcomed my hon. Friend's acknowledgement that our proposals for a police authority will introduce transparency and accountability into an area of London where they have not been present before. I have spoken of my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, East underlining that the Bill is not the Greater London council mark II, that we are looking forward, that we are moving forward, that the Bill is modern and that it is a new concept of government.

In the main, it is true to say that what we have proposed and brought to the Floor of the House has been welcomed by everyone on the Government Benches and not welcomed at all by the official Opposition. In the main, the Liberal Democrats welcome the Bill and say that they will work with us.

Many issues have been raised tonight and we shall have an opportunity to address them all in Committee. I shall end as I began. I and my hon. Friends take great pride in keeping our promise to Londoners. This is another example of the Government keeping their promises. I commend the Bill to the House.

[Mr. Deputy Speaker]

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I now call the Government Whip to move—

Sir Sydney Chapman: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I apologise to the Government Whip. Is it not right to say that the debate can continue until midnight, and that if anyone wishes to seek to catch your eye, the debate can so continue? In the event of no one else wishing to speak, can a Member who has already spoken be regarded as having the right to speak again?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is debating the Question. I have caught the eye of the Government Whip and invited him to put a motion. It is for the House to decide whether it wishes to divide on the motion. If the motion were defeated, the debate could continue until midnight.

Debate adjourned.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

To be resumed tomorrow.

FISHERIES

Ordered,

That the unnumbered Explanatory Memorandum submitted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 7th December 1998 relating to Fisheries: TACs and quotas for 1999 shall not stand referred to European Standing Committee A.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Housing

That the draft Government of Wales Act 1998 (Housing) (Amendments) Order 1998, which was laid before this House on 26th November, be approved.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

Northern Ireland

That the draft Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998, which was laid before this House on 30th November, be approved.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

Question agreed to.

Income Support

Ordered,

That the Income Support (General) (Standard Interest Rate Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 1998 (S.I., 1998, No. 2878), dated 23rd November 1998, a copy of which was laid before this House on 27th November, be referred to a Standing Committee on Delegated Legislation.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

COMMITTEES

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With permission, I shall put together motions 6 and 7.

Ordered,

Catering

That Helen Jones be discharged from the Catering Committee and Mr. Gerry Steinberg be added to the Committee.

Information

That Mr. Jon Owen Jones be discharged from the Information Committee and Mr. Ian Stewart be added to the Committee.—*[Ms Karen Buck, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.]*

Strokes

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Hill.]*

11.53 pm

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): Christmas is a particularly good time of year to consider the state of the nation's health, for obvious reasons. I suppose that I am looking to the Minister to show charity in redressing what I am sure was the unintentional omission of no longer having stroke as a national priority.

Since it was announced that we would have the debate this evening, I have been contacted by a number of hon. Members. I know that the hon. Member for Crosby (Mrs. Curtis–Thomas) wanted to be in her place and that for various reasons, she is unable to be present. She is very interested in the subject. I am delighted to see the hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) in his place. He is a regular attender in the Chamber and I had not realised that he was the victim of a stroke this summer. Having read the newspaper cuttings, I pay tribute to him on the remarkable recovery that he has made. He is in a good position to speak about the Government's decision not to continue with stroke as a national priority.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North–East Derbyshire): I compliment the hon. Gentleman on raising this subject. I also thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, for assisting me when I had a stroke, which happened on the Bench in front of me. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner) and an Attendant serving the House also assisted. The events were of great personal importance and give me some insight into this issue. I am keen that the Government should pay proper attention to the interests of bodies such as the Stroke Association.

Mr. Amess: I am glad that the hon. Gentleman has made that point. Although it may be slightly embarrassing that you are in the Chair at the moment, Mr. Deputy Speaker, there is no doubt that had it not been for your good self and others, the hon. Gentleman might not be with us today.

I note that the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes) is in his place and I am delighted that my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) is also here. She knows how important the subject is. I am even more delighted that the Under–Secretary of State for Health, the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (Mr. Hutton) is to reply to the debate. He is a product of Westcliff grammar school in my constituency. We are proud that a product of a local selective secondary school has become a Minister. I am not so delighted about his politics, but I do not think that it is churlish to hope that in the coming year when we debate the future of grammar schools, he will bear in mind the great debt that he owes to Westcliff high school for boys. It is barmy to deny future generations the opportunity of the education that he had without putting something better in its place.

I regret the removal of stroke as a priority. The Conservatives' "The Health of the Nation" White Paper set two targets for stroke: one for those under 65 and another for those between 65 and 74. For whatever reason—no doubt the Minister will enlighten me—there is now just one target for heart disease and stroke combined for the under-65s only. I regret that.

Each year, more than 100,000 people in England and Wales have a first stroke. It is a little like Members of Parliament saying that they are experts because they are a father or a mother, but my father died following a number of strokes. He was a good age and his strokes went on over five years. He liked the occasional drink. The first time that it happened, as I remember only too well, my mother thought that he might have had a little bit too much to drink. We realised that something had happened to him—my nephew was present at the time—when he lost his speech. I have not had the same experience as the hon. Member for North–East Derbyshire, but I have seen my mother, who was nearly 80, caring for my father for five years. She kept him alive, but he lost a great deal of his dignity. He went to a speech therapist, but he never really regained his speech. I have witnessed at close quarters what stroke means for many people.

There are more than 60,000 deaths each year due to stroke. It is the third most common cause of death, after heart problems and cancer. Stroke is the largest single cause of severe disability in England and Wales. The estimated cost to the national health service is £2.3 billion a year. The cost of stroke care will rise in real terms by about 30 per cent. by 2023. As we all know, stroke is blockage of the supply of blood to the brain. The effects of stroke can be mild or severe. Who is at risk? There seems to be a misunderstanding that only elderly people are at risk, but young people can suffer from strokes. It has been estimated that about 40 per cent. of strokes could be prevented by regular blood pressure checks.

I pay tribute to the Stroke Association, which has been quite magnificent in briefing me closely. It is a national charity which provides practical support to people who have had strokes, their families and carers. I was privileged to be present, by sheer coincidence, at my local stroke Christmas dinner on Saturday evening and I spoke to a number of people who have suffered strokes and their carers.

I am delighted that stroke services in Southend are first class. I have no complaints about our local services and we have an excellent unit at the hospital, which takes patients in the acute phase and works through the rehabilitation process with them. After discharge, essential follow-up rehabilitation is provided by community-based speech and language therapists. Neuro-physiotherapists and occupational therapists also help, and funding is provided for a Stroke Association dysphasia support officer who, together with a team of volunteers, provides continuing support for those who have communication problems after strokes.

The service in Southend is first class, but, without being dishonourable to the Minister, I want to articulate and share with him my concerns and tackle the ministerial responses, which I do not accept. "Modernising Health and Social Services: National Priorities Guidance 1999/00-2001/02" has at page 10—for all to see, so I am not imagining it—waiting list times, primary care, coronary care, heart disease and cancer, but there is no mention of stroke.

At page 20, although the Minister will argue that it is included under coronary heart disease, it is not at all clear that stroke is accepted as a priority. That important

[Mr. Amess]

document will direct the work of health and social services for three years from April next year, which is why I am very concerned. Stroke is the single largest cause of disability.

The Government's decision contradicts the long-term health strategy proposed in "Our Healthier Nation" earlier this year. "Clinical effectiveness using stroke care as an example" is a report by the Clinical Standards Advisory Group, an independent body which advises Ministers. The Government have drawn upon the variations in treatment and care revealed in it to support their general approach to quality in the NHS, but I believe that they have failed to address stroke-specific aspects of the report, some of which are extremely worrying.

Probably the most serious finding relates to carotid endarterectomies. Despite clear guidelines that such operations should be carried out only if complication rates are under 10 per cent., the majority of clinicians were not aware of complication rates. I am not trying to trick the Minister, but his boss, the Secretary of State for Health, described the situation as "particularly alarming" in early June. However, in a response to a parliamentary question, my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr. Hammond) was told that

"the Secretary of State will not be making any additional response to the specific recommendations regarding strokes."—[*Official Report*, 30 July 1998; Vol. 317, c. 5[illegible].]

The national service frameworks are aimed at major disease groups and care areas where national consistency in services is desirable; my concern is that that is not being properly tackled.

I shall be brief, as I want to give the Minister time to respond. I expect him to say that making everything a priority in the national priorities guidance would mean that nothing is a priority. However, the Stroke Association is not asking the Government to step outside the priorities identified in "Our Healthier Nation"; it wants the labelling of stroke as a priority to be followed through with action. The rhetoric of Her Majesty's Government—I speak, of course, as a critic—is wonderful, but action is lacking.

I expect that the Minister will also say that stroke has not been excluded from the national priorities guidance. The section of "Our Healthier Nation" that it is claimed covers heart disease and the stroke target is, in fact, entitled "Coronary Heart Disease"—I cannot for the life of me understand why no one had the common sense to retain stroke in that section.

The Minister will say, I am sure, that the national service frameworks on heart disease and older people will deal with many issues relating to stroke. Apart from the target for accidents, however, stroke is the only target in "Our Healthier Nation" for which a national service framework is not being developed.

I commend stroke units to the Minister; excellent work has been done in Glasgow in particular. It has been shown that the chances of a patient dying can be reduced by 18 per cent., that the chances of a patient dying or requiring institutional care can be reduced by 25 per cent. and that the chances of a patient remaining physically dependent can be reduced by 29 per cent. Those results suggested that approximately 22 patients would need to be treated in a stroke unit to ensure that an extra patient survived, that 14 would need to be treated to ensure that an extra patient returned home and that 16 would need to be treated to ensure that an extra patient regained physical independence. I suspect that the vertical structure of the Department of Health has led to the downgrading of stroke.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Amess: The Minister shakes his head but that is my suspicion. I have been advised that no one in the Department any longer takes an overall view of matters relating to stroke. As I said, we are approaching Christmas, so I hope that he has some good news for me.

12.9 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): I am grateful to the hon. Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) for giving the House the opportunity, even at this late hour, to debate this important issue. He asked me a number of questions, to which I hope to respond; in doing so, I shall correct some of his misunderstandings of Government policy.

I was very sorry to hear of the death of the hon. Gentleman's father from stroke. I was not aware of that fact. He said that his mother cared for his father for some time, so I am sure that he will join me in welcoming the Government's initiative in setting up a national strategy for carers—it is important that we deal with the needs of carers in a co-ordinated way. I join him in congratulating the professionalism and dedication of national health service staff in his constituency, where, as he will know, I lived for many years—I retain great affection for that part of the country, where many members of my family still live. I am very glad also that my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) has made a full recovery from his stroke.

The hon. Member for Southend, West was right that, as the UK's third-biggest killer is stroke, and as it is the largest cause of serious disability in the UK, it is a subject that affects us all. We all need to know what the risk factors are for stroke. Through the NHS and other agencies, we need well-integrated services to help care for, treat and rehabilitate patients following a stroke.

As the hon. Member for Southend, West knows from his personal experience in his family, a stroke can be a catastrophe for patients and their families. Each year, 110,000 people in the UK experience their first stroke and 30,000 have recurrences. It is estimated that about 350,000 people are severely disabled at any one time because of stroke. It is the third most common cause of death in the UK, and an important cause of severe disability. Although the majority of strokes affect older people, anyone can have a stroke at any age. The devastation that an unexpected stroke brings to the life of a younger person in particular—and to their family—can be barely imagined.

I reassure the hon. Member for Southend, West that we take the issues very seriously. The Government are committed to reducing the numbers dying from stroke, and the numbers of those suffering disability as a result of stroke.

There are three key areas where we can influence things: first, through prevention and education about risk factors; secondly, through the care that people receive—normally in hospital—immediately following a stroke; and thirdly, through rehabilitation services, which ensure that patients and their families can return, as far as possible, to the life style that they enjoyed prior to a stroke.

Strokes are a major cause of disability, and we must do everything possible to prevent and limit the burden that they impose on both stroke victims and on those who care for them. In the consultation paper, "Our Healthier Nation"—to which the hon. Member for Southend, West referred—we have selected heart disease and stroke as a priority for action, and we are proposing a target reduction in stroke mortality of at least a further third by 2010. This target is taken from a 1996 baseline.

What can people do to modify the risk of getting a stroke? Modifiable risk factors include smoking, raised blood pressure, raised plasma cholesterol and physical inactivity. Other contributory factors are excessive alcohol intake, obesity, excess salt in the diet and diabetes. Inactive people face three times the risk of stroke that people who are active face, and smokers face twice the risk. The Department of Health has been funding a major physical activity campaign called "Active for Life". This campaign highlights the relatively simple forms of physical activity—for example, a brisk walk for 30 minutes, five times a week—that can help to protect against stroke. We are spending £9 million on the campaign.

The Government have just published our White Paper, "Smoking Kills", which sets out our new proposals for implementing a ban on tobacco advertising. Together with other measures, we believe that that will be a significant step towards tackling one of the major risk factors for stroke. The commitment in the White Paper is clear evidence of our determination to address the issues raised by the hon. Gentleman. I am sorry that he did not mention the White Paper.

What about people who suffer a stroke? The needs of stroke patients span a wide variety of services. Patients who suffer a stroke will need acute care immediately following their stroke and, depending on the severity of the stroke, a programme of rehabilitation to help them optimise their independence afterwards. Stroke is a medical emergency, and the majority of patients are admitted to acute medical wards from accident and emergency departments. The aim of initial treatment is to stabilise the patient, and to reduce fatality, to reduce major disability and to prevent secondary stroke.

We are starting to see some evidence that new clot-buster drugs may improve the treatment of acute stroke. However, we need to look at further research before those drugs enter mainstream use. Nevertheless, there is a growing view that early admission of stroke cases to hospital is beneficial to ensure the patient's oxygen supply remains unimpaired and that blood glucose levels, and other aspects of metabolism, can be controlled.

The pattern of care for stroke patients is varied in England. Following the acute phase, patients may remain in acute medical wards or transfer to a stroke unit or rehabilitation facility, or have a package of rehabilitative care in their own home. The Stroke Association's recent good practice resource document, which it issued to health authorities and community health councils in September, provides practical examples of local stroke services, delivered in a range of different settings. I would certainly join the hon. Gentleman in praising the good work of the Stroke Association.

Stroke units have brought about an enormous change in the care of stroke patients. There is evidence that dedicated stroke care greatly improves outcome and reduces mortality. Specialisation of nursing staff is a key factor in a successful stroke unit. The characteristics of a stroke unit include a multi-disciplinary team; co-ordination of rehabilitation, started early; nursing integration with multi-disciplinary teams; active involvement of carers provided with the right information; discharge planning and early social work involvement; and, often, the support of a Stroke Association family support worker.

We are aware that there are different types of stroke units. They may be bricks and mortar units, in the sense that they are based in the same hospital, or they may be established through working protocols that provide care pathways for patients with stroke. We stressed the importance of care pathways in the recent guidance document, "Commissioning in the New NHS", in October. Our proposals for pathways of care will link primary, secondary and social care, where appropriate. We emphasised in the guidance that care pathways should be developed to cover a range of preventive, diagnostic, palliative, rehabilitative and other care components in an integrated programme of care.

Rehabilitation is a crucial service that gives people who have had a stroke the time and opportunity to recover properly following any treatment that they have received in hospital. We emphasised the need for rehabilitation and recovery in "Better Services for Vulnerable People", which we issued last year. Health authorities will review and propose changes to their policies for rehabilitation and recovery for older people.

Evidence from clinical trials suggests that early rehabilitation intervention leads to improved physical and functional outcomes. The first three months are the most critical period when the greatest recovery is thought to occur. In November, my Department, together with the relevant professional organisations, issued a directory of developments in occupational therapy, physiotherapy and speech and language therapy, to share and promote good practice in the development of rehabilitation and recovery services generally.

The directory contains a section on stroke that sets out working examples of the delivery of stroke services in a multi-disciplinary environment: that is real partnership in action. We issued a rehabilitation handbook in 1997, aimed at health service commissioners, giving details of good practice and quality measures for rehabilitation services.

Many of those examples illustrate another important strand in the modern, new NHS: working in partnership. This autumn, we issued landmark guidance: the national priorities guidance. For the first time, we have issued joint priorities guidance to health and social services that sets challenging targets for the next three years that all parts of the NHS and social services will be expected to meet. We are focusing on the targets that make a difference to patients. It provides the NHS and social services with a

[Mr. John Hutton]

three-year planning framework, backed by the largest ever increase in resources in the history of the national health service.

Promoting independence is one of our key priorities in the national priorities guidance. The priority stresses that the partnership of timely health and social services in the community can make a crucial difference to the ability of older people to maintain or achieve independence and maintain a healthy life style.

I know that there has been some disappointment that stroke has not been included specifically as a priority. Demanding decisions will always need to be made in priority setting, but stroke has not been omitted from the national priorities guidance: it is covered under the coronary heart disease priority, which emphasises the importance of the "Our Healthier Nation" target for heart disease and stroke and the role of the national service framework for coronary heart disease in delivering national priority guidance objectives to meet that target.

We do not discount the difficulties that are often encountered by younger people who suffer a stroke. I have already mentioned the national priorities guidance priority for promoting independence. As well as applying to older people, for whom we are developing the latest national service framework, it contains a reminder that

"For adults of working age, statutory agencies have a responsibility to help service users and their carers of working age to stay in or regain employment where possible."

The hon. Gentleman rightly referred to the Clinical Standards Advisory Group. He will know that in 1997 the Government asked the group to investigate clinical effectiveness in the NHS, using stroke as a marker condition. Its report had relevance to stroke care as well as messages about generic approaches to effectiveness.

The Clinical Standards Advisory Group made three recommendations in its report. First, it said that there should be more rigorous central collection and review of evidence, and clearer central direction as to the changes in clinical practice required. That recommendation is more than met by the proposals for a new national institute for clinical excellence, which will mean that, for the first time, patients and NHS staff will be able to turn to a single authoritative source of clinical and cost-effectiveness advice.

Mr. Barnes: My hon. Friend has made many interesting points, but why is the Stroke Association, which does such fantastic work, so upset by the failure to have specific targets for stroke? Specific targets should be ones that the Government are able to deliver easily and well, and the exercise, diet and other recommendations, which my hon. Friend mentioned and which should be undertaken to improve health, can be delivered through a good publicity campaign.

Mr. Hutton: We have set a clear target, to which I referred in my opening remarks, for reducing mortality rates from stroke by a third by 2010. We are clear about the importance that we attach to tackling instances of stroke, and we are determined to take the agenda forward positively. We are addressing the issues responsibly and setting the right priorities.

The second issue raised by the CSAG was that the implementation of centrally supported guidelines should be better co-ordinated. That recommendation is more than met by the proposals for clinical governance which will provide the local infrastructure, and national service frameworks, which will provide the national drive for selected topics. We announced last month that the next national service framework would be on services for older people. We are still considering the arrangements for taking forward the framework, but we are very aware of the increased risk to older people of suffering a stroke. The incidence of stroke rises from three people per 1,000 per year in the age group 55-64 to 20 per 1,000 people per year for those aged over 85.

I would like to make more points about the issue of stroke, how we manage the incidence of that illness and the positive approaches that the Government want to take. I reassure the hon. Member for Southend, West that we take the issues seriously and we are developing policies that we believe will address the concerns that he has raised tonight. I hope that we can work with others in the national health service and the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues on the Health Committee to take that important work forward.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-two minutes past Twelve midnight.

House of Commons

Tuesday 15 December 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH

The Secretary of State was asked—

Ambulance Response Times (Cornwall)

1. **Mr. Matthew Taylor** (Truro and St. Austell): If he will make a statement on ambulance response times in Cornwall. [62442]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): Ambulance response times in Cornwall improved in 1997-98. The percentage of 999 calls reached within 19 minutes rose by more than 1 per cent. despite a 1.5 per cent. rise in the number of ambulance callouts.

Mr. Taylor: The Minister did not say, however, that the response times were very much below those in the citizens charter for health standards. Anyone calling an ambulance in Cornwall stands a very high chance of it taking well over the response time in the citizens charter. Is that not because there is no proper funding for ambulance services in rural areas to take account of the obvious extra difficulties in reaching patients quickly? Does that not result in patients' lives being put at risk?

Mr. Hutton: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman did not feel able to join me in congratulating NHS staff in Cornwall on achieving the improvements in response times to which I have referred. We are aware of the difficulties and officials in the NHS regional office are working closely with the health authority and the ambulance service in Cornwall to see what further action can be taken to improve response times. The hon. Gentleman mentioned resources. The changes introduced to the weighted capitation formula for 1998-99 include a geographical cost adjustment for emergency ambulance services which benefited Cornwall health authority by more than £1 million.

Dental Services

2. **Mrs. Helen Brinton** (Peterborough): When he will publish his strategy for NHS dentistry. [62443]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): We will publish our new strategy before too long, when we have considered all the points raised by those who have contributed their views on the future of NHS dentistry.

Mrs. Brinton: I thank the Minister for that reply and for the additional funding promised by the Government to increase people's right and accessibility to NHS dentistry. I note that it is 20 times more than that provided by the previous Administration, but I would like to ask the Minister for his proposals and his strategy for sorting out the current bureaucratic muddle that seems to be delaying the allocation of funds to dental practices.

Mr. Milburn: As my hon. Friend rightly says, we have made available extra money to improve access to NHS dentistry and to try to clear up the mess left by our predecessors, who ran down NHS dentistry in too many parts of the country. The Government are committed to building it up rather than running it down, and to date we have approved some 250 bids under the investing in dentistry initiative. As a result, an extra 600,000 patients now have access to NHS dental care. An additional 90 proposals are in the pipeline, including some from my hon. Friend's area, and we are assessing them carefully.

Mr. Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton): On the issue of free dental checks for all, the Deputy Prime Minister said on the BBC:

"We've got to find the money to finance it".

Does the Minister still stand by that commitment?

Mr. Milburn: As the hon. Gentleman is aware, his party was in power for 18 years. If he is so committed to free dental checks, perhaps he should have done something about it.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): Does my right hon. Friend agree that, if a dentist mistreats patients in order fraudulently to create work for himself, those patients should be properly compensated? Does he agree that it is not acceptable for any insurance company to reject any such claim without giving proper reason? Does he plan to do something about that in future?

Mr. Milburn: I am not aware of the issue that my hon. Friend raises, although I am happy to look at any individual case. The overwhelming majority of NHS dentists—and NHS staff—are trustworthy, honest and reliable. However, we intend to take tough measures against the minority who are not. As my hon. Friend is aware, we have recently appointed a new director of counter-fraud work who will spearhead the assault on fraud wherever it occurs—in dentistry, medicine or anywhere else within the NHS.

Cancer Patients (Drugs)

3. **Mr. Nick St. Aubyn** (Guildford): If he will make a statement on the refusal by some health authorities to fund recently approved drugs for cancer patients. [62444]

The Minister for Public Health (Ms Tessa Jowell): We want to ensure that cost-effective clinical services, including treatments for cancer, are provided on a consistent national basis. There is unacceptable

fragmentation and variation which we are tackling, first by establishing next April the national institute for clinical excellence, which will set standards for clinical excellence and secondly, through the commission for health improvement, which will ensure that those standards are applied in practice.

Mr. St. Aubyn: On 30 June at Health questions, the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Darlington (Mr. Milburn) told the House:

"no one will be denied the drugs they need. That is a guarantee."—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1998; Vol. 315, c. 143.]

Yet we hear today from the Minister that there is differentiation in the allocation of drugs that cancer patients need. How can she possibly justify an immediate breach of the promise by her ministerial colleague less than six months ago?

Ms Jowell: Frankly, that is pretty thin. My right hon. Friend was referring to the approach to consultation and the local priorities that would be adopted by primary care groups. The hon. Gentleman's question was about cancer. For the benefit of his constituents, who may feel cheated if he does not receive the answer, I shall set out precisely what is happening in cancer treatments involving Taxol, about which there is some concern.

We asked the Standing Medical Advisory Committee to assess the latest research results and evidence; it endorsed the view that Taxol is the preferred treatment for ovarian cancer. We then wrote to all national health service regional directors of public health to inform them that the committee had endorsed that evidence. Evidence-based guidance on improving outcomes in gynaecological cancers will be published in the spring and will be sent to all health authorities and trusts. It will refer to the use of Taxol in the treatment of ovarian cancer.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Many cancer patients will have cancer because of smoking. Although no doubt many people will continue to choose to kill themselves through smoking, does my hon. Friend agree—bearing in mind last week's White Paper, particularly its title—that it is unacceptable that those of us who do not smoke should continue to be put at risk of being killed by those who do smoke? What steps will she take to protect non-smokers from the dangers of passive smoking?

Ms Jowell: The title of the White Paper—"Smoking Kills"—is a statement of fact. My hon. Friend is right to suggest that we will not make progress in tackling cancer or heart disease unless we reduce the number of deaths from smoking. He will know that the measures set out in the White Paper include an agreement with the Health and Safety Commission for consultation on the establishment of an approved code to guide practice on smoking at work, which will have legal status if approved. Moreover, the five leading organisations in the hospitality trade have given a commitment to work together to improve ventilation in pubs, wine bars and restaurants where people smoke, and to increase the number of smoke-free public places.

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): The hon. Lady said that she had a system for the evidence-based prescribing of Taxol, but will she accept that there will be new drugs, which will not be as widely available as they should be? Does she recognise the fact—I seem to invite her every three weeks to do so—that rationing is taking place in the NHS? That is nothing to be ashamed of—there will always be such tension. Will she at least start a debate with Liberal Democrats and the public and find out how much people are prepared to pay to ensure that rationing—I invite her to use that word—is not as extreme as it is at the moment?

Ms Jowell: I make it clear once again that the NHS will not apply blanket bans to clinically effective treatments. We have also made it clear that the NHS must be able to keep pace with what are, as the hon. Gentleman rightly said, rapid advances and developments, particularly in new drug treatments, so that those treatments are properly assessed for their clinical and cost effectiveness. We must ensure that the status and benefits of the new drugs are established through the work of the national institute for clinical excellence and the commission for health improvement.

Miss Ann Widdecombe (Maidstone and The Weald): Is there rationing or is there not?

Ms Jowell: No.

Miss Widdecombe: In view of the Minister's unequivocal statement that there is no rationing—which I think will be greeted with disbelief by the medical profession—can she now comment, for the benefit of the House, on the availability not only of the cancer drugs, but of beta-interferon, which is rationed; recombinant, which is rationed; Aricept, which is rationed; and the new anti-psychotics, which are rationed?

Ms Jowell: There are two ways of dealing with precisely the kinds of prescribed drugs to which the right hon. Member has referred. We had 18 years of the Conservatives' way, which produced fragmentation and 3,000 GP fundholders, who all had different systems of prescribing. The alternative—which would be just as unacceptable to the people of this country—would be to define clinical protocols, which would mean that everybody's treatment was preordained in Richmond house.

What we are doing—in, as I am sure the right hon. Lady will forgive me for suggesting, a third way approach to treatment—is establishing the national institute for clinical excellence, which will assess and evaluate new treatments, and we will ensure that those new treatments are made available as quickly as possible to patients, who will benefit from them.

Frankly, the right hon. Lady does her constituents and the people of this country no good by raising spectres that are not borne out in practice. In practice, people will receive treatment on the basis of their clinical need.

Miss Widdecombe: I am tempted to observe that the pantomime season must have come early. May I ask the Minister a straightforward question? Under her Government, are any drugs not being prescribed by practitioners or others on the ground of cost—yes or no?

Ms Jowell: I would be very happy to volunteer to be either the front or the back of the right hon. Lady's

pantomime horse. I have already made it clear that the basis on which drugs are prescribed and treatment administered is clinical need and proven clinical effectiveness.

Millennium Compliance

4. **Mr. Mark Todd** (South Derbyshire): What assessment he has made of the preparedness of ambulance services in respect of year 2000 compliance. [62445]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): Ambulance services are making good progress towards ensuring year 2000 compliance. Progress is monitored quarterly by the national health service executive.

Mr. Todd: May I point out to my hon. Friend that Derbyshire ambulance trust has not yet reached year 2000 compliance? However, the recently announced merger between Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire ambulance services may allow it to use the more advanced technology available in those services. I very much hope that the merger will not distract Derbyshire ambulance trust from improving response times in the area, which, sadly, are the worst in the country, in spite of the tremendous efforts of the trust's hard-working staff, who have put in a great deal of time and effort to try to remedy the situation.

Mr. Hutton: I can assure my hon. Friend that the new trust that will operate in the east midlands will improve the delivery of service to his constituents and others in the east midlands. That is clear, and we approved the merger for those reasons. We are monitoring closely issues concerning improving response times for the Derbyshire ambulance service. As he will know, additional expenditure has been authorised to ensure year 2000 compliance, and we expect to see an improvement in response times.

Mr. Philip Hammond (Runnymede and Weybridge): Can the Minister confirm his current estimate of the total cost to the NHS of millennium compliance? What progress has his Department made in seeking to recover any part of that anticipated cost from suppliers of equipment to the NHS?

Mr. Hutton: I am afraid that I am unable to respond in detail to the hon. Gentleman's questions. I am happy to look into the matter and respond to him in writing, if that would be helpful. However, Government Members will take with a pinch of salt the lectures from Conservative Members, who had plenty of opportunity to address these issues in government, and conspicuously failed to do so.

Mr. Paddy Tipping (Sherwood): As Derbyshire does not have millennium compliance and Nottinghamshire does, will my hon. Friend take steps to ensure that the new ambulance trust of Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire rises to the level of the best rather than sinking to that of the worst?

Mr. Hutton: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that he seeks. Let me make it absolutely clear that, following approval for the merger, the Derbyshire ambulance service will use the same accident and emergency control systems that are currently in use by Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire, and that those two systems are completely year 2000 compliant.

NHS Review Panels

5. **Dr. Vincent Cable** (Twickenham): What plans he has to review the workings of independent review panels in the NHS. [62446]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): An independent evaluation of all aspects of national health service complaints procedures is due to begin in the new year. It will include consideration of the independent review procedures.

Dr. Cable: Does the Minister agree that there is a great danger that the review panels' independence—which is so vital for patients—could be undermined by the intervention of health service officials? Will he agree to take a fresh look at a case about which I have written to him, concerning a constituent of mine, the Hertfordshire health authority and the Queen Elizabeth hospital? The authority arbitrarily ruled that a maximum of two members of a family could be present at an inquiry into their mother's death, and as the family is larger than that and is unwilling to be divided, the inquiry cannot proceed.

Mr. Milburn: I am certainly extremely happy to refer that case to the people who will carry out the review of the NHS complaints procedure. That procedure was introduced by the previous Government in 1996; as it has now operated for a couple of years, we think that it is right to review it, and in particular to consider it from the point of view of complainants, patients and indeed the NHS staff who have to operate the system. I am happy to take on board the hon. Gentleman's comments and to ensure that they are fed into the review.

Tobacco

7. **Mr. Andrew Love** (Edmonton): When he expects to publish his White Paper on tobacco. [62448]

9. **Mr. Ian Stewart** (Eccles): When he expects to publish his White Paper on tobacco. [62451]

The Minister for Public Health (Ms Tessa Jowell): The White Paper, "Smoking Kills" was published on 10 December 1998.

Mr. Love: I thank my hon. Friend for her reply. Is she aware that the pressure group ASH—Action on Smoking and Health—recently described the White Paper as the first serious and sustained assault on the enormous burden of illness and death caused by smoking since scientists first brought its dangers to our attention 40 years ago? Is she also aware that, each and every day, about 450 children take up smoking, and that half of all smokers will die from the habit? In the light of the White Paper, what further action will the Government take in their war against smoking?

Ms Jowell: I thank my hon. Friend very much indeed for that question. I am glad that ASH, and almost every

other organisation except the Tobacco Manufacturers Association, welcomed the White Paper's sensible approach and the fact that we have set very clear targets and recognised that achievement will come through the combined efforts of Government and other organisations that can deliver solutions to the many problems that arise.

At the centre of our concern about smoking is the objective of cutting the number of children who take it up in the first place. My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the staggering figure of an estimated 450 children a day taking up smoking. The action that we intend to take was clearly set out in the White Paper: tough enforcement, including a ban on advertising, and an unprecedented campaign to start shifting children's attitudes so that they no longer see smoking as a passport to adulthood. We, and all the organisations that we have worked with, recognise that it will take time, which is why we have set targets for 2005 and 2010.

Mr. Stewart: Smoking causes one in seven deaths from heart disease, and my constituency has the highest incidence of heart disease in the country. In my local authority of Salford, the British Heart Foundation runs the Heartstart scheme, which trains young people to give emergency life support to those suffering from heart attacks and teaches them about the causes of heart attacks, including smoking. Does my hon. Friend agree that such schemes help local communities and educate young people about the dire consequences of smoking, and will she commend the scheme to other areas?

Ms Jowell: I am happy to commend the Heartstart scheme that my hon. Friend mentions. We want to ensure that we do everything we can to spread the benefits of best practice more widely. Next year, we will publish the public health White Paper, which will set clear targets for tackling heart disease, especially in areas where the rate is high, such as my hon. Friend's constituency. I reiterate the point I made earlier: that the White Paper "Smoking Kills" is a critical part of our battle against cancer and our battle to reduce unnecessary deaths from heart disease.

Mr. Jim Marshall: I declare an interest as a smoker. Although I welcome the Government's proposals, I am sceptical about their likely success. If the Government are serious about curbing smoking, why do not they adopt a fiscal approach and massively increase the price of cigarettes, so that people cannot afford to buy them? The Government could also levy a windfall tax on the tobacco companies, so that they are no longer so profitable.

Ms Jowell: My hon. Friend will see from the White Paper that fiscal measures are part of the battle against smoking, because keeping the price up means that children are less likely to be able to afford them and to take up smoking in the first place.

I emphasise the extent to which all the measures in the White Paper are based on the best available evidence that they work. Seven out of 10 smokers want to give up, and access to smoking cessation services is critical in enabling smokers to do so.

All the evidence from other countries is that one cannot stop children taking up smoking unless tobacco advertising is banned. Our approach to developing the package of proposals announced last week was guided by and rooted in the evidence.

Mixed-sex Wards (Goodmayes)

8. **Dr. Julian Lewis** (New Forest, East): If he will make a statement on the advice given to Goodmayes hospital by the NHS executive concerning the possible continuance of mixed–sex wards in psychiatric units. [62449]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): The advice given to the Goodmayes hospital about the elimination of mixed-sex wards in psychiatric units is exactly the same as the advice that has been given ever since the new Government started to issue advice on the matter. We are determined to eliminate mixed-sex wards in all hospitals, including psychiatric ones.

Dr. Lewis: Does the Secretary of State understand that a contradiction is apparent? Does he recall that on two previous occasions when I have raised the issue of the continuation of mixed-sex wards—and even the construction of new mixed-sex wards in psychiatric units—he said, in forthright and welcome terms, "If this is going on, I am going to put a stop to it." In the light of what he said when stopping the mixed-sex ward at Charing Cross hospital, how does he explain the letter from the NHS executive to Goodmayes hospital which stated:

"completely segregating services would not be acceptable, as there are good clinical reasons to provide an environment in hospitals which, as closely as it can, prepares people for their return to their own accommodation"?

Is not that a backsliding on the categorical commitment that the Secretary of State has given? That backsliding was confirmed in a letter to me, dated 1 December, from the Under-Secretary of State, in which he says:

"Within a mental health unit, medical opinion favours an environment which is as normal as possible."

Does the Secretary of State accept that medical opinion, as represented by the Royal College of Psychiatrists, does not favour that sort of latitude?

Mr. Dobson: Our promise was to eliminate mixed-sex wards. I am confident that about 95 per cent. of health authorities will have done so by 2002. When the hon. Gentleman raised with me the matter of the building of some mixed-sex psychiatric wards at the Charing Cross hospital, I put a stop to it. They have been redesigned, and they are no longer mixed-sex wards. The proposal for Goodmayes hospital is not for mixed-sex wards, but will mean that some of the day rooms and other facilities will be available to both male and female patients. That is reasonable, if the clinicians responsible for those patients consider it appropriate.

I have made it clear to those clinicians that such a decision must be subject to the absolute certainty that measures are taken to protect women from any form of harassment—sexual or otherwise—by the men in the unit. However, the wards in which the patients sleep will be segregated, as will the washing facilities and lavatories. If the women want to get away from the men, they will be able to do so. That means that we are keeping our pledge, not evading it.

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): The Government are to be commended for ending what has undoubtedly been a very unpopular practice, which was introduced by the

previous Government to save money. Does my right hon. Friend agree that elderly people who are sick and need to go into hospital will especially welcome the measure?

Mr. Dobson: In fairness to the previous Government, I must say—it grieves me to do so—that the practice was not entirely their fault. For a brief period during that Government's time in office, the conventional wisdom among some of the practitioners in this sector was that mixed-sex wards were all right and were akin to mixed hairdressers and mixed saunas. However, it is not like that for people in hospital, and we are putting a stop to that mistaken fashion. The previous Government did nothing about it, but we are going to eliminate mixed-sex wards. We are going about doing so, and have found £70 million to do it with.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I have constantly welcomed the Secretary of State's stance on mixed-sex wards, which I know were introduced by the practitioners. Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that, in a recent answer to the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland stated that about six or seven of the units in Northern Ireland still run mixed-sex wards? Will it be possible for the right hon. Gentleman to speak to his right hon. Friend to ensure that Government policy is consistent throughout the nation?

Mr. Dobson: It is foolish in this House for people who are not experts to tread on Northern Ireland territory, as the history of the area shows. However, I will make sure that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is aware of what the hon. Gentleman has said.

Road Accident Victims

10. **Mr. David Taylor** (North-West Leicestershire): If he will make a statement on his policy on emergency treatment fees in the NHS for road accident victims. [62452]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): The Government intend to end collection of the emergency treatment fee by national health service trusts. An amendment to section 158 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, removing the right of NHS trusts to the fee, is contained in the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill which was introduced in the House of Commons on 27 November 1998 and which was given a Second Reading on 8 December.

Mr. Taylor: I thank the Minister for that reply. Is he aware, that on 12 March 1991, the right hon. Member for Charnwood (Mr. Dorrell), who was then a junior Health Minister, stated in a written answer that the Conservative Government intended to abolish the emergency treatment fee

"as soon as a suitable legislative vehicle becomes available"?—[*Official Report*, 12 March 1991; Vol. 187, c. *493*.]

That vehicle was clearly involved in a nasty collision, because the then Government announced the death of that intention in June 1995.

In the light of that, how does my hon. Friend react to the Opposition's criticism of what the Government intend to do, and how does he rate, on a scale of one to 20, the utter political hypocrisy of that criticism?

Mr. Hutton: I am grateful for that question. It is probably another example of hot air as regards the Opposition's promises when they were in government—promises on which they conspicuously failed to deliver. On this occasion, as on many others, it has taken a Labour Government to clear up the mess that they left behind.

Children's Homes

11. **Mrs. Teresa Gorman** (Billericay): If he will make a statement on his plans for the future management of children's homes. [62453]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): On 5 November, I spelled out to the House our plans for the future management of children's homes to ensure that children are better looked after and to protect them from abuse, exploitation and neglect. Further details were given in our White Paper, "Modernising Social Services", which I announced to the House on 30 November.

Mrs. Gorman: I thank the Minister for his reply. I sympathise with the view he takes, and admire the fact that he intends to do something about that serious matter. Given the risk that is posed by men running some care homes, which is obvious from the number of cases of abuse, he might consider recycling grannies—women who have raised families and who are good at spotting when something is going on. If such people were in charge of homes, the children in them would have a naturally sympathetic character to whom to turn. Will he consider that as a practical and serious proposition?

Mr. Dobson: The short answer is yes, I will consider it, as it seems to be a perfectly sensible proposition. My only point on the hon. Lady's introductory remarks is that for boys in homes, as in schools, it is a good idea to have safe men around to provide role models of how grown-up males should behave. However, we need to ensure that they are not among the abusers and exploiters of children. The hon. Lady's point is practical and sensible, and I will look into it.

Mr. Hilton Dawson (Lancaster and Wyre): May I commend my right hon. Friend's commitment to the radical reform of the care system and the ending of abuse in it, to improve a situation that has brought great shame on this country? Perhaps he will reconsider his recent remarks. Surely men can play a tremendous role in the care system, in children's homes, in foster care and in social work with children. We have to get the protection of children in the system right, and we have to ensure that we have the right people in it, rather than making facile judgments based on gender.

Mr. Dobson: My hon. Friend may have misheard me. I said that, provided that the men are safe, it is as well to have men around, because they set a proper example to young people of the way in which decent adult males should behave. That certainly applies to boys, and to some extent it may also apply to girls, some of whom may have come from homes in which the adult male has knocked about and battered the women of the household. It is

probably a good idea for children who come from such households to discover that there are men who do not behave like that.

Health Trusts

13. **Mr. David Kidney** (Stafford): How many health trusts have become technically insolvent. [62455]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): None.

Mr. Kidney: Do I thank my hon. Friend for that answer? He is aware that there are some health trusts, such as the Mid-Staffordshire General Hospitals NHS trust in my constituency, whose finances are sufficiently precarious to need special monitoring by his officials. Does he agree that national health service staff in such trusts work in a dedicated and committed way and yet sometimes feel that the financial position is such that they are working with one hand tied behind their backs? Can he assure us that the monitoring is sufficiently robust to ensure that the full range and quality of services that the local populace, including trust employees, require will be available in those trusts?

Mr. Milburn: Of course staff in organisations that have been landed in debt as a consequence of the policies carried out by the previous Government are at the sharp end of a host of dilemmas. When we came to power, two thirds of health authorities were in debt and the national health service as a whole was in debt to the tune of £450 million, thanks to the lacklustre and reckless performance of the Conservatives. We have halved that debt and are well on target to get the NHS back into financial balance. That is largely a consequence of the record levels of investment that we are now making in the NHS, including the extra £38 million that has gone into the South Staffordshire area.

Miss Julie Kirkbride (Bromsgrove): I am sure that the Minister is aware that the way he is tackling the funding problem in Worcestershire is to close Kidderminster general hospital and to downgrade the accident and emergency departments at Kidderminster hospital and at the Alexandra hospital, Redditch, to the status of glorified minor injuries units. That is the policy of the Labour Government, whereas, for 18 years under the previous Conservative Administration, those facilities remained open.

The Minister might not be aware that, during the last general election, his hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mr. Lock) campaigned saying that a Labour Government would keep Kidderminster general hospital open; or that his hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Jacqui Smith) campaigned on the basis that the accident and emergency department at Alexandra hospital would not be downgraded. However, both those things have come to pass under a Labour Government who promised to improve our national health service.

All we in north Worcestershire have experienced are cuts. I should be grateful if, instead of conversing with other hon. Members, the Minister answered the real concerns of the people of north Worcestershire who are finding that the Labour Government, who promised to improve the NHS, are cutting it.

Mr. Milburn: The hon. Lady must be the only person in Worcestershire who thinks that Kidderminster general hospital is closing. It is not closing; it is staying open. Instead of condemning my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest, she would do better to praise him for the conscientious campaign that he has led to ensure that there is a high-quality, modern and dependable emergency centre at the hospital. Its existence is thanks to the decisions that we have taken, which are getting Worcestershire health authority and the good people of Kidderminster out of the mess in which the Conservative Government landed them.

Care Standards

15. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): What roles and responsibilities he proposes for regional commissions for care standards. [62457]

16. **Mr. Michael Jabez Foster** (Hastings and Rye): What roles and responsibilities he plans to give the regional commissions for care standards. [62458]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): The current system for checking on children's homes and residential and nursing homes for adults is simply not up to the task. Some places are not regulated at all and there is no check on the standard of care delivered to people in their own homes. The commissions for care standards in each region will change all that. Their job will be to check on every aspect of social care, and to ensure that top-quality services are delivered and that no one is abused, exploited or neglected by the people who are supposed to be looking after them.

Mr. Thomas: I thank my right hon. Friend for that answer. I warmly welcome the commissions on care standards and many of the other measures contained in the White Paper, not least the general social care council and the new national performance framework. Does my right hon. Friend agree that those measures to increase openness and accountability are vital if we are to deliver better services to carers and their families and to the staff who work in those vital services?

Mr. Dobson: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend's point. The system we inherited is a shambles—it does not work. It leaves small children's homes and local authority homes uninspected; and in some cases, it leaves people of extremely dubious background delivering services into the homes of people who are often elderly or disabled. We believe that those arrangements need to be better regulated than they have been in the past, and I am confident that our proposals will do the job.

Mr. Foster: I, too, thank my right hon. Friend for his comments. Will the regulatory arrangements go beyond residential centres, such as nursing homes and children's homes, and extend into the community to cover those services that are carried out in the community?

Mr. Dobson: Yes. As I have already said, we want to make sure that the standard of care delivered in the homes of individuals who are living in their own home is checked on and raised. Organisations such as fostering agencies also need to be checked on. The fact is that nearly everyone who provides social care to people in residential settings, in their own homes or through

agencies does an absolutely first-class job. However, there are some rotten apples in the barrel and we need to sort them out.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): What flash of inspiration led to both the previous questions being identical? Were they planted?

Mr. Dobson: I think they reflect the degree of concern on this side of the House about the appalling state of regulation, which we inherited from the previous Government, governing children's homes, old people's homes and other domiciliary services. I think they also indicate the extent to which my hon. Friends are determined to put the matter right and stick up and speak up for the people whom they were elected to represent. If one or two Opposition Members had been interested, they might have put down similar questions.

Mr. Ian Bruce (South Dorset): Will we have to wait until the regional commissions are in place before we are told how mental hostels in places such as Weymouth are to be funded? The Secretary of State will know that, before he moved to the Home Office, his hon. Friend the Member for Brent, South (Mr. Boateng) was working to ensure that people with mental illness who did not need medical care could be looked after in the community in the types of hostels that we pioneered in Weymouth decades ago.

We have not received any information about the funding of those hostel—whether it be through housing benefit, the health service or social services. Will the Secretary of State please resolve that difficult problem, which he and his hon. Friends have acknowledged is real, and help the mentally ill whom his White Paper was supposed to assist?

Mr. Dobson: If the hon. Gentleman will provide details of the particular circumstances in Weymouth, I shall do my best to sort them out.

Mr. Bruce *rose—*

Mr. Dobson: It is no good the hon. Gentleman jumping up in the Chamber and expecting me to know the details of what is going on in Weymouth. I am very sympathetic to the problem as he has outlined it. I shall look into the matter and try to sort out the problem, if there is one.

Our general position is that we want to improve the system of care and treatment for everyone who is mentally ill across a wide range of circumstances. We are determined to provide that improved care, whether it is delivered in secure units, purpose-built hostels or people's homes. If there are particular problems in Weymouth, I am happy to look into them.

Refugee Doctors

17. **Mr. Mike Gapes** (Ilford, South): What plans he has to facilitate the employment of refugee doctors. [62459]

The Minister of State, Department of Health (Mr. Alan Milburn): We are aware of the difficulties faced by refugee doctors and the problems that they can encounter when trying to secure appointments in the NHS. Overseas-trained doctors provide an invaluable contribution to the effective operation of the health service. I shall ask the advisory group on medical and dental education, training and staffing to consider the needs of this particular group of overseas doctors and make recommendations as soon as possible.

Mr. Gapes: I am very grateful for that reply. My right hon. Friend is probably aware of the important initiative taken by Redbridge and Waltham Forest health authority in setting up a group for refugee doctors, which includes people from Afghanistan and Somalia. The group comprises top medical specialists who, because of difficulties with regulations and the English language, cannot use their skills at present.

When the advisory group is established, will it liaise with Ministers in the Department for Education and Employment and the Home Office? It has been drawn to my attention that refugee doctors are experiencing difficulties with Home Office requirements and jobseeker's allowance conditions which make it impossible for them to practise their medical skills. Refugee doctors are told that they must work as shelf stackers, for example, when they have particular needs and want to help the communities in which they live.

Mr. Milburn: As my hon. Friend is aware, there are immigration and asylum rules, and it is important that doctors who are refugees to this country abide by them. However, the advisory group will consider a range of factors in making recommendations to me. It is also important to understand not only that concerted national action is needed in this area but that we should seek to build on the very good work that has been undertaken in my hon. Friend's area by the North Thames Deanery, the General Medical Council and local health authorities. They are seeking to provide better training for refugee doctors in order to facilitate their entry into the national health service where that is appropriate.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): How does the Minister intend to meet his targets for the recruitment of qualified doctors for our national health service without being obliged simply to import them, a policy that he will know is vigorously opposed by the British Medical Association?

Mr. Milburn: In a number of ways. First, as was recommended by Sir Colin Campbell's committee, established by the previous Government, we shall increase the number of doctors in training. I can tell the hon. Gentleman—*[Interruption.]* If the right hon. Member for Maidstone and The Weald (Miss Widdecombe) will stop chuntering and start listening, we will make some progress. We are already ahead on the first recommendations of the Medical Workforce Standing Advisory Committee.

Secondly, we shall increase the number of doctors who return to the national health service. Hon. Members will be aware that nowadays many doctors leave the service, for example, to have a family. It is important that we put in place flexible, family-friendly employment policies to recruit those doctors back into the NHS. The Government are taking action on that issue; the previous Government failed to act at all.

Fiona Mactaggart (Slough): Is the Minister aware that doctors in oppressive countries very often end up as refugees because they protect the victims of torture and maiming, or that the refugee experience often destroys people's self-esteem? I have in my constituency an Iraqi doctor who was completely convinced that she could not pass the test, although her English was excellent, because her self-esteem had been destroyed by the torture that she had experienced.

If the Home Office delivers on its commitment to speed up asylum decisions, those doctors will be available to work more quickly. Does the Minister accept that it is therefore urgent to develop schemes such as those described by my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South (Mr. Gapes), and that we need to get ahead in enabling those doctors to practise while they are in the UK?

Mr. Milburn: I am sure that my hon. Friend is absolutely right to say that refugee doctors who come to this country often face a host of problems. If they are admissible as refugees and if we want them to work in the national health service, it is obviously vital that we provide them with support and training to allow them to provide high-quality services to patients. There is a lot of very good local experience, such as that in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Ilford, South, and we seek to build on that.

Hospital (Swindon)

18. **Mr. James Gray** (North Wiltshire): What progress is being made on plans for the new hospital in Swindon; and when it will open. [62460]

The Minister for Public Health (Ms Tessa Jowell): My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions is currently considering whether the proposals for the hospital should be subject to a public inquiry on planning grounds, and will announce his decision shortly.

Mr. Gray: My constituents in North Wiltshire are very happy that the hospital is moving fast towards opening on its new site at Commonhead, which is so easily accessible from the M4, but are concerned that the considerations by the Secretary of State for Environment, Transport and the Regions will delay that. I hope that the Minister will have a word with him to encourage him to make progress as fast as he can. More importantly, will the Minister advise the House as to how many hospitals which are due to open in the near future under the private finance initiative, which her party so strenuously opposed before 1997, were planned under the Conservative Government?

Ms Jowell: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, none of the eight hospitals that are under way were planned under the Conservative Government. They promised a private finance initiative for hospital development, but delivered not one hospital.

Ms Julia Drown (South Swindon): Will my right hon. Friend confirm that the Ministry of Health has recognised the inadequacies of the Princess Margaret hospital in my constituency and the need to update its buildings for the Swindon population as we look towards the next century? Will she do everything in her power to ensure that we get the much improved buildings we need as soon as possible?

Ms Jowell: Yes.

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): Will the new hospital in Swindon provide much-needed neurological beds for the south-west region, especially in light of the experiences of my constituent, Mr. James Payne, who, having suffered a double fracture of the skull, was refused admission to a neurological unit in Taunton or in any of the other regional hospitals purely on the grounds that he was 65 years old, not on the basis of clinical assessment? Can that be right?

Ms Jowell: I am very happy to write to the hon. Gentleman about the distribution of services to the people of Wiltshire.

Infertility Treatment

19. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): If he will further review the application for infertility treatment by Mrs. X whose name has been provided to him. [62461]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health (Mr. John Hutton): I have every sympathy with my hon. Friend's constituent. However, Mrs. X's situation has been fully considered and reviewed by the health authority, and it would not be appropriate for me to comment on or become involved in an individual case.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: The health authority is simply wrong. This is one of the most distressing cases that I have had to handle in the 20 years I have been a Member of the House. It involves a jeopardised marriage and an attempt at suicide by Mrs. X some two months ago, all because North Cumbria health authority refused to show any flexibility about the rules. Is it not about time that we introduced new rules to require health authorities to provide this treatment, given that the only justification for not providing it is that a woman's husband had a child by a previous marriage? Surely it is a matter of civil rights.

Mr. Hutton: First, I pay a very warm tribute to my hon. Friend for the energy and commitment with which he has represented his constituent in very difficult circumstances. However, I am sure he is aware that, as we have made clear today and on other occasions, the Government are absolutely committed to ensuring greater national consistency of access to services. He will also be aware that we have commissioned advice from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and are studying that advice carefully.

Waiting Lists

20. **Mr. Alan Simpson** (Nottingham, South): What the current trend rate is in NHS waiting lists; and what it was in the period up to May 1997. [62462]

The Secretary of State for Health (Mr. Frank Dobson): We have reversed the rising trend in national health service waiting lists which we inherited from the previous Government. In the six months to March 1997, waiting lists rose by an average of 16,000 a month. In the latest six months for which figures are available, waiting lists have fallen by an average of 20,000 a month.

Mr. Simpson: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. It speaks volumes about the difference between this Government and our predecessors, and my right hon. Friend deserves to be congratulated by the House. Will he in turn join me in congratulating Nottingham health authority not only on continuing to meet the guidelines of no one remaining on the waiting list for more than 18 months, but on having in the past six months secured a 16 per cent. reduction in the number of people waiting between 12 and 18 months? Will he put a cherry on that particular cake by saying whether we have any Christmas suggestions as to how health authorities that meet those targets can be helped to maintain them in the year ahead?

Mr. Dobson: I certainly join in congratulating the staff of Nottingham health authority, and everyone else in the NHS, on all their hard work. Certainly, the biggest proportionate fall in waiting lists has been in the Trent region, which includes Nottingham. We will shortly be releasing an additional £32 million to tackle waiting list problems in the winter, and that money is intended to go to those health authorities that have had the greatest success. That, of course, will be followed by 10 times that sum—a further £320 million—to be invested in reducing waiting lists next year.

Mr. Simon Hughes (Southwark, North and Bermondsey): Given that the Prime Minister answered a question from my right hon. Friend the Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) two weeks ago about waiting times for out-patient treatment by saying that the explanation was that referrals were increasing, when in fact they were going down; and given that the number of people waiting was going up, while there was a reduction of 37,000 in the number of people being treated, will the Secretary of State confirm that, although the Government have this year presided over a reduction in waiting times for those who have seen their consultants but not yet been treated, there has also been an increase of nearly 200,000 in the number of people who have seen their doctor but are still waiting to see their consultant?

Is not the truth, in the last health questions of 1998, that the Government have not reduced waiting times; they have simply given people in the health service different ways of waiting?

Mr. Dobson: No is the answer to that. Since the Labour Government got in, an additional 300,000 waiting-list cases have been treated compared with the preceding 18 months under the Tories. An additional 300,000 emergency cases have also been treated during that time. The number of out-patients who have been treated has also risen: in the previous quarter, the number was 100,000 more than the number of out-patients treated in the last quarter under the Tories. So work on waiting lists is up by 300,000, work on emergency cases is up by 300,000 and work on out-patients is up by 100,000. How that can be a reduction, God only knows—except he may be a Liberal.

Pensions

3.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Social Security (Mr. Alistair Darling): With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on pensions, changes to which are a part of our modernisation of the welfare state.

All our reforms are driven by the central principle—work for those who can and security for those who cannot. Welfare reform is well under way. We have launched the new deal and announced the single gateway to the benefits system. We are modernising the tax and benefit system to make work pay with a new working families tax credit, underpinned by the national minimum wage.

We have begun to tackle child poverty, with the biggest ever rise in child benefit. We are reforming the Child Support Agency and we have introduced a national child care strategy. We are also reforming the legal aid system and student finance. Over the past few months, I have set out proposals for wide-ranging reforms to disability benefits, along with reforms to modernise bereavement benefits. Today, I set out far-reaching reform to ensure that the pension system meets the needs of the next 50 years.

A pension is the most important asset that people have, more important even than buying a house. That is why we want to put pensions on a sound footing, where every individual is guaranteed a decent income in retirement and where people can rely again on secure and effective private pensions, delivering security for today's pensioners and peace of mind for tomorrow's.

We are already providing security for today's pensioners with value added tax on heating cut to its lowest possible level, a winter fuel bonus, help with bus fares, free eye tests and higher pensions. Under the new Labour Government, Britain's pensioners are £140 a year or more better off, providing real security for today's pensioners. For future pensioners, I am publishing our proposals in a Green Paper, which sets out a new insurance contract between the state and individuals, a new public-private partnership for better pensions. Copies of the Green Paper are available in the Vote Office and a summary of the proposals is being sent to every right hon. and hon. Member this afternoon.

There are three overwhelming reasons to reform pensions. First, if we do nothing, one in three people could, by 2050, retire on income support. Under the current system, people can work hard all their working life and still retire on an income so low that they will depend on benefits for the rest of their life.

Secondly, many middle and higher earners want to save more and should save more, but have lost faith in the pension system because of the scandal of pension, mis-selling. Up to 2.5 million people, including nurses and teachers, may have been sold the wrong pension and have had their peace of mind in retirement shattered. This Government, unlike the previous Government, have not turned a blind eye to their plight. We have already toughened the regulation of personal pensions and taken firm action to ensure that those who lost out receive proper compensation. For those who do not have an occupational scheme, too often there is not a good place for them to put their savings.

Thirdly, the current system gives a poor deal to the millions of mothers and carers who have career breaks and find that they are penalised because of that.

The principles driving our reforms are clear. Everyone who can save for their retirement has a responsibility to do so. In turn, the Government have a responsibility to provide security in retirement for those who cannot save enough. Today, I am announcing a radical new pensions policy. It is radical because it guarantees a decent income for all pensioners. For the first time ever, a lifetime's work will not lead to dependency on means-tested benefits in retirement.

Our reforms create a new insurance contract combining the price-linked basic state pension with a minimum income guarantee that we will aim, in the long run, to increase in line with earnings. It will be a contract that rewards thrift and savings instead of penalising them. It is radical because, for the first time, it helps mothers get a decent pension despite career breaks and because it will, for the first time, give carers a right to a decent pension. It is radical because it replaces SERPS with the new support and a new state second pension to help those on low and middle incomes, and because it builds a completely new private funded pension that is simpler to understand and has lower charges. These proposals will put the trust back into pensions.

We are building a new insurance contract between state and individuals. In the past, the basic state pension has been the sole focus of the Government's deal with pensioners. The basic state pension will remain a universal, contributory, non-means-tested benefit, but the basic state pension alone cannot provide, and has never provided, everyone with a decent income in retirement. This Government will do better.

In future, there will be a new contract. The state will guarantee that everyone who retires in poverty will receive a minimum income guarantee well above the current level of income support—beginning at £75 a week for a single pensioner and £116 a week for a pensioner couple.

The complaint I hear more than any other from the pensioners I meet is that, as the country gets wealthier, they do not share in the gains. That is something that the Government want to remedy. Today, I can announce that it is our intention to give poorest pensioners the chance to share in the rising wealth of the country. Consistent with the proper management of the country's finances, our aim is that, over the long term, the minimum income guarantee should rise in line with earnings. We are also consulting on the best ways of changing the rules so that we reward savings even more.

However, after a lifetime of work, people should not have to rely on the guarantee in retirement. We want to ensure that they can do better than that guarantee. We want to ensure that low earners in work on less than £9,000 and people whose work is interrupted to look after children or sick relatives, as well as moderate and higher earners, have a higher income than the guarantee. So we need to do more.

Low earners in work depend on SERPS for a decent pension, but SERPS is income related. If one earns little, one gets little. The state earnings-related pension scheme does not give sufficient help to low earners. So today I can announce that we will replace SERPS with a new scheme—the new state second pension. It will deliver a

dramatic increase in the value of pensions. The new state second pension will be worth at least double what SERPS currently pays for people earning less than £9,000. Up to 5 million people stand to benefit. Under the current system, a person earning £6,000 a year would get £13 a week from SERPS, but will get £46 a week from the new scheme—£33 a week extra, providing real security for today's low paid.

We also promised in our manifesto that we would do more for people caring for children, or sick or disabled relatives, and for people who have worked, but cannot work now because of disability. So today I can also announce that we will end that unfairness where someone who gives up work to care does not have the chance to build up a second pension. That means that a mother who takes a couple of years off work to look after her two young children will no longer lose out on her pension.

Our reforms will, for the first time, provide security for 2.5 million carers, by helping them with pension contributions—enabling them to build up a second pension as of right. They will be credited into the new state second pension. Parents of nearly 200,000 disabled children, and some 1.5 million people with a long-term disability and interrupted work record, will also gain from that proposal.

The problems of the current system do not affect only those who earn less than £9,000. Too many people earning more than £9,000 get a raw deal, and our plans will change that. Middle earners will get more help, and they and higher earners will have decent products in which they can invest. That is why it is our long-term ambition that everyone earning more than about £9,000 should be in a secure, funded private pension. Stakeholder pensions will be attractive to them because they will be more secure, with independent trustees ensuring that the rights and interests of scheme members are put first.

Stakeholder pensions will be cheaper. On average, personal pension charges can eat up 25 per cent. of savings, whereas we expect stakeholder pensions, with simpler regulation, to result in a substantial reduction in charges. They will be more flexible. If a member—for example, a mother who is at home bringing up children—does not contribute for a period, no charges, which could eat up savings, will be levied. Similarly, those who change jobs will not lose out.

Stakeholder pensions will be higher quality. We shall protect consumers by building quality into the system. We shall also require all stakeholder pension schemes to meet specified standards. They will also be simpler to understand. Pensions are complicated, and private pensions are often a nightmare to understand. We intend that stakeholder pensions will be simpler and more transparent.

Our proposals for stakeholder pension schemes will give up to 5 million people who today are without a second funded pension the chance to build a secure, decent income for their retirement. Everyone earning between £9000 and £18,500 will receive better pension rights.

The Government expect to spend about £500 million annually on increased payments for those who join funded schemes. For many people, that will make joining a new stakeholder pension scheme more attractive. Someone earning £12,000 a year could increase their stakeholder private pension in retirement by almost £1,000 a year. Moreover, once stakeholder pensions are up and running, we shall reshape the system to make private funded pensions the only sensible option for those earning above £9,000

I strongly believe that those incentives are fairer and more effective than increasing compulsion. I do not think that it is the Government's job to make life harder for people on £12,000, for example, with two children and a mortgage to pay. I want to help middle earners, not penalise them. However, I want them to know exactly where they stand.

I want to provide another type of incentive for people to save. Today, I am able to announce that, for the first time, we shall provide an annual pensions statement for every working person in the United Kingdom. The statements will set out how much private and state pension people are likely to receive on retirement. Everyone will therefore know exactly where they stand. People will also see, in black and white, the consequences of not saving more. We shall work with employers and the pensions industry to make the statement as effective as possible.

Other reform options have been urged on us. Some people have suggested that we introduce compulsion for all now. Some people have suggested privatising the entire system. We closely examined those proposals, and I should like to tell the House why they would not work.

We already compel more than 20 million employees to save. Therefore, the question is whether we should compel them to save even more. The fact is that, for low earners, no amount of extra compulsion will help, because they simply cannot afford the amounts that they would have to save. Therefore, anyone who backs compulsion for all will have to justify such a burden on low earners. I am not willing to do that.

Some groups, such as the self-employed, could afford to save more and are not saving enough, because they are not compelled to do so. We are consulting on letting the self-employed join the new state second pension in return for their contributions. However, we believe that it would not be right to compel them to do so before stakeholder pensions are properly established. Nevertheless, we shall keep under review the case for compulsion once stakeholder schemes have a proven track record, if people fail to save what they need to.

Other people have urged us to privatise the entire system. However, that would be no help for millions of low earners who could not afford to save enough. Privatising the system would cost £150 billion, even after the costs of disruptive changes to the tax system. The previous Government's plans would have meant massive up-front costs, loss of tax relief and abolition of the basic state pension.

Alternatively, some people have urged us to use private schemes that would take money from the private pensions of middle and high earners to give money to the low paid. That is not practical. I also do not believe that it would be acceptable. Our proposals are, by contrast, manageable, affordable and workable.

By extending individual pensions, and by a better combination of the state pension and the minimum income guarantee, we shall provide better pensions and also reduce significantly the share of state spending on pensions in the long run. The overall amount spent on

[Mr. Alistair Darling]

pensions will go up, but private personal pensions will take an increasing share of spending. The current percentages of 60 per cent. state and 40 per cent. personal provision will, over time, become 40 per cent. state and 60 per cent. personal private provision. The reason that is important is that, as people live longer—often for 30 years after they retire—they create new demands on the welfare state, such as long-term care. We will ensure that our plans mean that we can afford to tackle those charges.

Our radical new contract for pensions will ensure security for those who cannot provide for themselves and encourage those who can save for their retirement to do so. It will lift many more working people, mothers and carers off means-tested benefits. Our plans will help low earners to find security in retirement for the first time. They will give a boost to middle earners with a new, secure private pension and money to invest in it. They will help everyone—no matter what one earns—by providing a better regulated and more secure private personal pension system.

That is good news for today's pensioners, and it is peace of mind for tomorrow's. I commend the proposals to the House.

Mr. Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green): The proposals are complex, and it is not possible to go into all of them. However, it is worth dealing with some of the key issues.

The Secretary of State made much of what the Government are doing, but, despite having promised a huge amount over the past 18 months, today he had nothing to say about the myriad and various schemes that already exist—money purchase, final salary, defined contributions, defined benefit, additional voluntary contributions, free-standing AVCs, and so on. That complexity of arrangements continues, but he had nothing to say about it.

I listened to the Secretary of State as he went around the studios over the past four or five days. He was keen to encourage everyone in the belief that occupational pensions were the right thing, if people worked for companies that provided them, but he did not appear to realise the irony of making such a statement when the first thing this Government did on coming to office was to take £5 billion per year out of the schemes through tax.

The Green Paper referred to the state earnings-related pension scheme. There is a great deal that needs some serious explanation from the right hon. Gentleman. In the Green Paper, he refers to a cost of £5 billion, in due course, for his proposals. Perhaps he would clarify that. If he intends to increase the level paid to those on lower incomes, where exactly will he get the money? Will it come from increases in contributions for some, or will it be linked to an increase in tax?

The right hon. Gentleman is vague about the timings. Exactly when will the proposals come through? What does he propose? How does such an increase square with his general pledge, which he has made endlessly—as has the Prime Minister—to reduce the overall cost of welfare?

On the issue of stakeholder pensions, the right hon. Gentleman proposed a new second-tier scheme, latched on to the back of the other schemes. In this particular case, it will carry the stamp of Government approval. Do the Government intend, in return, to guarantee the outturns of the stakeholder pensions? After all, many people on lower incomes will want to join such a scheme because they have been encouraged to do so by the Government. What will the Government say to them if the scheme falls short when they come to retire?

The right hon. Gentleman had nothing to say about that in his speech. Will he guarantee that the scheme will be better, or as good as, existing schemes, which people might otherwise have joined? If he cannot answer that, will he at least say whether he will guarantee that the pension fund will be no less than the contributions made? The right hon. Gentleman must answer those questions if he intends to encourage people to join such schemes.

I come now to the proposals for carers. Over the past 18 months, we have been keen to raise the problems of carers and to deal not just with their pensions, but with their incomes. Will the right hon. Gentleman clarify what he means by those who have taken some time off work? Is it not the case that about 53 per cent. of carers are full-time carers and have no alternative or part-time income? Does he expect the scheme to extend to them if they have no record of earning? Single-earner couples would be affected, so what does he intend to do about them?

If the right hon. Gentleman does not have clear proposals when it comes to paying for the other parts of the scheme, he should remember that one of our criticisms—and one of our proposals for change at the last election—was that single-earner couples bear a much higher proportion of the tax burden than other taxpayers. If the Secretary of State is not going to deal with that, presumably he will make a statement explaining how he intends to reduce the burden. Otherwise, single-earner couples will be hit disproportionately.

The Secretary of State left out an important point about the basic state pension. He now has an opportunity to clarify the position. Why does he not deal directly with the question of uprating the state pension in line with prices? He has an opportunity to tell us at the Dispatch Box and, after the next general election, that Labour will not do other than uprate the pension in line with prices, which is what used to happen. *[Interruption.]* Labour Back Benchers are making a noise. What they do not realise is that the Secretary of State talked about linking earnings to income support, not the basic state pension. The minimum guarantee concerns income support.

Is it not a fact that the right hon. Gentleman's proposals to link income support with earnings will mean a massive increase in means-testing at the bottom end? He disguised the fact by pretending otherwise, but that is what will happen.

The Government have asked the public today to trust them on a range of pension issues. They do not, however, bear the public's trust, for a number of reasons. First, they take £5 billion a year from pension funds and pensioners generally, attacking those who have worked and those who have saved. Secondly, they are the Government who, during the last general election and before, allowed Back Benchers to travel around the country raising expectations that they would establish, across the board, a link between earnings and the basic state pension. What they have now done is sneak in a minimum income guarantee that is concerned only with the means-tested system, and will do nothing for existing basic state pensioners.

Today, the Government have missed much of the plot. They have spent 18 months fiddling around, and have produced an expensive partial system that does not deal with the issues. I condemn them for that.

Mr. Darling: If anyone has missed the plot, I do not think that it is me. Having listened to the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Mr. Duncan Smith), I am not entirely clear whether he is for or against what we propose.

If I were the hon. Gentleman, I would not go on about trust too much. He should remember that 2.5 million people were mis-sold pensions because of what the last Government did. It was the new Labour Government who began to clear up the mess caused by that mis-selling, not only through the action taken by my right hon. Friend the Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Mrs. Liddell), but through our overhaul of the regulatory system.

The hon. Gentleman referred to means testing. He ought to understand that we are heading for a time when a third of people now working will be on income support, under the policies with which his party left us. It is this Government who, through the proposals that I have set out today, will ensure that people can work for a lifetime, can retire on an income above the level of income support and therefore will not have to rely on means-tested benefits. This Government will ensure that fewer people will have to rely on such benefits. As a result of the last Government's policies, if we did not change the system, many pensioners today and in the future would depend on means-tested benefits—so that was not a very good point, either.

No doubt others will wish to return to the subject of the basic state pension. Let us be clear: in our manifesto, we said that we would increase the basic pension in line with prices. We have kept that promise, and we will keep it. It would, however, cost about £30 billion to increase the pension in line with earnings over the next few years. *[Interruption.]* If the hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green would listen for a moment, he might learn something.

We could raise the basic state pension in line with earnings, but that would not do enough to help the poorest people's incomes to rise above income support levels. At the same time, it would give money to better-off people who do not need it. What I am doing—this brings me to my next point—is using state support to help those on lower earnings to take their incomes above the income support level in the first place.

The hon. Gentleman asked about costs. The amount that the state will spend on pensions over the next 50 years will fall from about 5.4 per cent. of gross domestic product to 4.5 per cent. over that long period. We are using the money available to help those on low earnings far more than in the past because of the changes to the state second pension. The Government have a responsibility to help those who cannot afford to save to have a decent income in retirement without relying on social security benefits. We need to do more to help people get into funded pensions, where, generally speaking, they will be far better off than if they depend on the state alone.

The hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green asked me about SERPS. The cost is about £500 million, not £5 billion. *[Interruption.]* I can help the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) by telling him that the £5 billion relates to the next 50 years, so there is something of a difference there.

On the hon. Gentleman's first point—which was a not terribly good one about occupational pensions—if he reads the entire Green Paper, he will see that the Government believe that people should have options and choices, including stakeholder pensions, which fill a gap in current provision; occupational pensions, which some 20 million people already have; and personal private pensions.

Finally, the hon. Gentleman repeatedly asked about a guarantee. Let me make one thing clear. Through strengthened regulation, better options and more help to the low-paid, we are doing far more to ensure that future pensioners can have a secure and decent retirement—something that the previous Government did nothing about in all their 18 years.

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead): I congratulate the Secretary of State on safely delivering the Green Paper, and on the nature of his statement. I extend those congratulations to his colleagues in the Department. His proposals for carers pensions will also be welcomed in the country. I have two questions. Will the state second pension be funded or unfunded? If it is unfunded, does he recall that the previous Labour Government introduced a non-funded scheme which the Conservative butchered not once but twice? Given those circumstances, what guarantee can we give our constituents that, in 40, 50 or 60 years' time, the pension commitment that he has made today will be delivered?

My second point concerns the numbers on means testing. He said that, without his announcement today, in future about a third of pensioners would end their days on means-tested assistance. What reduction in that proportion will occur because of the Government's announcement?

Mr. Darling: First, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for his welcome. I should also like to thank the Minister of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Itchen (Mr. Denham) for all his work on pension development, which is much appreciated. I am also grateful for what my right hon. Friend said about carers.

My right hon. Friend asked two questions. First, the state second pension is an unfunded, pay-as-you-go scheme. He raised the general prospect of a future Government dismantling it. As I understand it, the present Conservative policy is to move completely to a funded scheme—that is, if the Tories have not abandoned the basic pension-plus that they announced before the election. The state second pension is sensible and workable as well as affordable, and recognises that a funded scheme is not an appropriate option for people on low earnings, because they can never put in enough to get a decent income in retirement. Therefore, the state has to give them money to put into a funded scheme or, alternatively, as my right hon. Friend proposed, the better-off must subsidise the less well-off within a particular pension fund.

We must recognise that a funded scheme is not appropriate for people on low incomes, and that the state has a role to redistribute wealth to ensure that such people get a decent pension in retirement. That is affordable and

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workable. If any party proposed as a central manifesto commitment to privatise the system at massive cost—at a time when there will be the most pensioners and the fewest workers to support them—its proposal would be rejected at a general election, just as the Conservative party's proposal was rejected at the previous general election.

My right hon. Friend asked about means-tested benefits. My objective is to ensure that people who work throughout their lives do not retire on means-tested benefits. One can never exclude the possibility that, for one reason or another, people will not hit that target; that is the reason for the minimum income guarantee. However, I believe that lifting as many people as possible off means-tested benefits should be a central objective of Government policy. *[Interruption.]* I thought that Conservative Members were against means testing, but now they are saying that they are not. I believe that our policies will ensure that we lift people who work throughout their lives off means-tested benefits. That approach should be supported, not criticised.

Mr. Steve Webb (Northavon): I thank the Secretary of State for his courtesy in making available a copy of the statement to the Opposition earlier this afternoon.

A detailed document such as this Green Paper requires close scrutiny, but Liberal Democrats' initial impression is that it is a small step in the right direction down a very long road. I suppose one could best describe it as the most radical package since the previous one. At the end of the 1970s, we had the state earnings-related pension scheme; at the end of the 1980s, we had personal pensions; and at the end of the 1990s, we have stakeholder pensions. To guarantee that another Secretary of State does not produce another radical package in 10 years, the right hon. Gentleman should secure a cross-party consensus on pensions. Will he work with us and other people of good will to construct such a consensus?

The Secretary of State shied away from making pension contributions compulsory for people on £10,000 to £20,000 a year. He will recall that the Conservatives also tried using incentives, albeit for personal pensions. Of the 5 million people who took out personal pensions, 2 million are no longer putting in a penny of their own money—there is no additional private saving. Why does he think that his proposals will be better? Surely requiring people who can save to save is more effective than crossing one's fingers and hoping that they will.

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) put his finger on the problem when he mentioned today's working poor. The Secretary of State has said, "Lots of people will get bigger pensions, but no one will get a smaller pension." If the poor are to have more and the rich are to have the same, the money will have to come from tomorrow's taxpayers.

Successive Governments have ripped up pensions promises. The Conservative Government ripped up SERPS, but they were none the less re-elected, so the Secretary of State's belief that such actions will not be electorally popular does not wash—parties do not announce such plans in their manifestos, but carry them out anyway. Promising today's poor money from tomorrow's taxpayers will not provide a secure basis for pensions policy. I would not want my income in old age to depend on the generosity of tomorrow's taxpayers; I wonder whether the Secretary of State would.

The proposal to link the so-called guarantee to earnings is welcome. The Secretary of State has promised to do that in the long term, but will he do it in the short term? The people who enjoy the guarantee are already 75 or 80, so how long will they have to wait? Will he pledge to implement the proposal immediately? We welcome the guarantee, but he knows that it does not apply to those hundreds of thousands of people who do not claim their entitlement and to those hundreds of thousands of thrifty savers who, with only £8,000 of life savings, are told that they are not entitled to the money. Finally, will the Secretary of State reassure the House that he will not rest on his laurels, but will find more money for today's pensioners, particularly the oldest pensioners?

Mr. Darling: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He mentioned today's pensioners, but I made it clear that the statement and the Green Paper were about pensions in the future. We have always made it clear that the significant increase in help for today's pensioners, which we announced in the comprehensive spending review, was never meant to be the last word on the matter. Today's statement deals with pensions structure and the options that will be open to people in the future.

Having lectured us on the need to be prudent with our money, the hon. Gentleman demanded that we uprate the minimum income guarantee immediately. He cannot have it both ways. We have made it clear that our long-term objective is—consistent with the prudent management of public finances—to uprate the guarantee in line with earnings.

The hon. Gentleman asked about affordability. Being a professor, he is no doubt a clever man. When he gets to the appropriate part of the Green Paper, he will see that the amount of money that the state will spend over the next 50 years as a proportion of gross domestic product will go from 5.4 to 4.5 per cent. of a larger GDP. The amount that we are proposing to spend is affordable, as he will see from the Green Paper. We are ensuring that more help goes to the lower paid, who need it.

The hon. Gentleman made an important point about incentives. I am not sure whether the Liberal Democrats are in favour of compulsion right across the board.

Mr. Webb *indicated assent.*

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman nods, so let us assume that he is. He has thought a lot about those things, and he must face up to the fact that the very poor can be compelled to save every last bean and they will still not have enough for a decent pension. On the other hand, a lot of people are now saving far more than the minimum—especially people at the top end of the income scale—and compelling them to save even more seems perverse.

Mr. David Rendel (Newbury) *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Darling: The Liberals do not think that that is perverse. I bet they do not say that at by-elections in some parts of the country.

We propose to give people an annual statement in which they can see where they stand. Most people have no idea what awaits them when they reach pensionable age, and the statement will help. The incentives and additional rebates that people can take into a funded pension will help also.

I made it clear in my statement that, once stakeholder pensions are established, it is my intention to ensure that we amend the system further, so that, if people stay in the state system, they will lose money, and they would be far better off in a funded scheme. That is very important, because I firmly believe that people who can afford to save should save more, and funded schemes will always be better than unfunded schemes. People will be better off as a result.

I believe that the combination of the minimum income guarantee, the new state second pension, the stakeholder pension and the annual statement will do far more than has been the case for the past 25 years to set pensions on a proper footing for the future.

Lastly, I am delighted to work with anyone to form a cross-party consensus. I very much look forward to working with the hon. Member for Northavon (Mr. Webb) and his colleagues. If they have a constructive suggestion to help us to get a better policy, I will be pleased to receive it from him.

Mr. Malcolm Wicks (Croydon, North): I very much welcome that part of my right hon. Friend's statement that dealt with carers. For too long, carers have been patted on the back and then neglected, and it cannot be right that those who provide care for elderly relatives and children with disabilities pay a penalty of poverty in their own old age. Will the Secretary of State say more about the carers pension, which we welcome?

Will the Secretary of State say something about the future of the means test? Am I right in thinking that, if we raise means-tested income support in line with earnings, but the basic pension only in line with prices, the numbers of our elders eligible for the means test will grow in the short term? How will the new SERPS impact on means-testing in future? Does the Secretary of State have a projection of how many people in 20, 30 or 50 years will still be subject to the means test?

I very much welcome the stakeholder pension for those on middle incomes. However, if a funded stakeholder pension is good enough for middle Britain, why is it not good enough for the poor? Should not the taxpayer enable poorer people, through subsidies if necessary, to be included in the new second pension scheme, given that our forefathers and foremothers—Beveridge, Attlee, Castle and Crossman—wanted inclusive and comprehensive pension schemes that helped to integrate society, rather than divisive schemes for special classes of people?

Mr. Darling: I will try to deal with my hon. Friend's complicated questions as quickly as I can. He asked about carers. The carers covered will be those who receive invalid care allowance, those carers of people receiving attendance allowance or disability living allowance who qualify for home responsibilities protection, and child benefit recipients where the youngest child is aged five or under. In addition, there will be help for long-term disabled people with broken work records. Further details are in the Green Paper.

My hon. Friend asked about the state second pension and about means testing. The object of the state second pension is to ensure that, if someone has a lifetime's work, they do not rely on means-tested benefits when they retire. My whole objective is to avoid the situation that currently exists, in which a third of people now working—never mind those who are not working—are heading for a life on income support in retirement. That is not right, and I want to lift those people above that.

That is part of the rationale of replacing SERPS with a state second pension, which, let us remember, gives great help to those on low incomes. It doubles the amount that they will get, because it breaks the tie to earnings whereby someone with low earnings gets low benefits. It is of real help to low earners, many of whom looked to us for help when we were elected. We are providing that help.

I understand where my hon. Friend is coming from on means-tested benefits. There has been an academic debate on the subject for the past 50 years or so. At present, we have a combination of contributory and means-tested benefits, as well as benefits on the basis of need, such as disability allowance. If someone, for whatever reason, has not had the opportunity to build up a contributory right to a pension, means-tested benefits are one way of getting money into the hands of a person who needs it. For the life of me, I cannot see what is wrong with that.

I would rather that people did not have to depend on benefits, and I am taking steps to try to make that less likely, but, if there are poor people, we ought to help them. I have a great deal of difficulty with the idea that it is somehow bad to increase the threshold. If we are helping more poor people—I was under the impression that that was one of the things that we were elected to do—that is no bad thing; but I believe that we should do our best to avoid a situation in which we know that people will end up on means-tested benefits. For that reason, I believe that our proposals are absolutely right and justifiable.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): It would be churlish not to welcome much of what the Secretary of State announced today—there is considerable consensus on what needs to be done, as is clear in the all-party group on occupational pensions, which I chair—but I am afraid that the scheme is something of a mouse, whereas we were expecting a lion. We thought that he would produce a radical reform, encompassing the whole range of pensions provision, whereas in fact he has only tinkered at the edges once again.

It is clear that not very much thought has gone into how the changes affect the whole population. The Secretary of State said that he would hold consultations about including the self-employed. He has had an awfully long time to consider the matter, so why does he need to consult further? Why cannot he produce a scheme that encompasses the self-employed?

Does the Secretary of State propose to do anything about the problem of annuities? That is the biggest problem confronting people who are retiring now. The value of annuities has dropped by about 30 per cent. in the past 12 months, partly—even considerably—due to the Government's action on advance corporation tax. We can allow people to defer, and some are permitted—

Madam Speaker: Order. Hon. Members are now making speeches and explaining their own policies.

[Madam Speaker]

We must have questions to the Minister. I have the next business to safeguard, and that finishes at 7 o'clock, so, unless hon. Members put questions briskly, there will be very few asked, because I shall close down this period in a couple of minutes. Now, Mr. Butterfill, let us have a question, so that the Minister can answer.

Mr. Butterfill: Does the Secretary of State propose to consult further on allowing people to defer the purchase of annuities or to purchase an alternative investment, when annuity yields are low, and will he reconsider the position of section 226 policyholders?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman will read our detailed proposals in the Green Paper. I accept that he has not yet had a chance to look at it. Annuities are low because we are entering a new era of a stable economic environment. We now have low inflation—which is the best news that pensioners could ever have—rather than the rising inflation of the past.

The hon. Gentleman criticises us for holding consultations on whether the self-employed should be allowed to have a state second pension. I believe that people should have the opportunity to be consulted, and I cannot see what is wrong with that. Indeed, I made my position abundantly clear on the matter.

On the hon. Gentleman's general point, I was anxious to build on what we have at present. It is perfectly possible to have a convention of pension rocket scientists and come up with all sorts of exciting and exotic schemes, but I ask myself whether a scheme will work and be manageable and deliver good pensions to people in the future. My proposals will do that; I do not know about his.

Mr. Chris Pond (Gravesham): Is my right hon. Friend aware that the commitment that he has just underlined to seek to provide security in retirement for a majority of future pensioners, without the indignity and stigma of a means test, will be welcomed in my constituency of Gravesham and throughout the country? The policies of the Conservative party would have left millions of people subject to that stigma in retirement. Is he also aware, however, that many pensioners feel that the current system contains a certain unfairness and that, if they have saved a little for their retirement, over time, they are somehow penalised? Will he consider ways in which that unfairness might be addressed in the future?

Mr. Darling: Yes. I have made it clear in my statement and in the Green Paper that the Government want to consider that. It is one of the main, justifiable grouses from pensioners, and we are all aware of it.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): What is the Secretary of State's working assumption of the number of new stakeholder pensions that will be taken out after the scheme is implemented? In 2050, what proportion of people will still be on means-tested support?

Mr. Darling: Some 5 million people could potentially benefit from stakeholder schemes. They are people who can save and do not have the option at the present time. We have made a conservative estimate that, in the first two or three years, 1 million to 2 million people will join the scheme, but we want to build it up as quickly as possible.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that there is a simpler method? It is a bit old-fashioned, but it would mean that people such as Members of Parliament and those paid more would pay more in taxation so that pensioners could get increases in line with earnings. Notwithstanding that, I appreciate that my right hon. Friend is trying to prevent casualties in the future. Will he remember the casualties of the past? Several hundred sacked miners were prevented from getting their pension entitlements as a result of the 1984-85 strike. We now have a recommendation in a Government report by the coalfield task force. Will my right hon. Friend work with others from the Treasury Bench to try to get the matter resolved as soon as possible?

Mr. Darling: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who highlights an appalling case in which many former miners were the victims of mis-selling as a direct result of the previous Government's actions in the late 1980s. On the subject of the basic state pension—I repeat the point, because it is important—we had a choice. We could have uprated the basic state pension for future pensioners and that would have cost about £30 billion over the period in question. That would not help the poorest pensioners, but would give money to the better off who do not need it.

Instead, we decided that it would be better to use the money that we have at our disposal to benefit low earners to ensure that they retire on a decent income above income support. As a result of the new state second pension, someone earning about £6,000 a year will get £46 a week, instead of £13. That is a big increase. The proposals are a radical departure from what was done in the past, but they are right for the future.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Is not the main problem with the present system that, if one is on a low income, it is not worth one's while to take out a pension, because one loses income support? How will the situation be eased by linking the minimum earnings guarantee to earnings but not the pension? Are not the questions posed by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and the hon. Member for Croydon, North (Mr. Wicks) unanswerable? Because the Secretary of State has ducked compulsion for political reasons, the numbers of people on means-tested benefits will increase, not decline, in the years to come.

Mr. Darling: I am surprised that the Conservatives are in favour of blanket compulsion.

Mr. Duncan Smith: No, we are not.

Mr. Darling: Oh, they are not. Is that another split in the Tory ranks? The argument against compulsion is a practical one. If people are on low earnings, it does not matter how much of their disposable income one takes away from them, because they can never earn enough to get a proper pension. Most of those at the other end of the income scale are already saving enough. The self-employed are another matter, but the compulsion argument falls when we consider who would be asked to

pay more. The main problem that low earners face is that they cannot earn enough now to get a pension that would lift them above means testing. The reforms that I am making to the second state pension will enable people to work for their whole lives and get pensions above the minimum income guarantee.

I still believe that, despite those changes, having a minimum income guarantee is wholly justifiable. The logic of the hon. Gentleman's position is that there should be no safety net at all, on the grounds that that would compel people to do more. What I am proposing is practical and workable, and I am more than happy to rest my case on both those assertions.

Mr. Paul Flynn (Newport, West): Does my right hon. Friend recognise the argument that compulsion must be necessary for young people, as it is impossible to convince 20-year-olds that they will ever grow old and need a pension? Although the Government deserve credit for giving £140 a year to people on a basic pension, that amount goes only a small way towards compensating them for the £1,040 that they have lost—that they were cheated out of—when the link between pensions and earnings was broken in 1980.

Does my right hon. Friend accept that the Government's targeting of poor pensioners is wide of the mark, and that 1 million pensioners will miss out on the guaranteed minimum pension because they regard income support as a handout, or charity? They would accept it if it were added to the basic pension as a right, as for 50 working years they have paid contributions that have increased at the rate of inflation. Why should we continue to cheat them by increasing the basic pension at a rate that is below that of inflation?

Many Labour Members are surprised by the faith that my right hon. Friend has shown in the private pension market after years of mis-selling. He said that the charges on the private stakeholder scheme would be below 25 per cent. Will they fall to the level of the national insurance charges on the basic pension, which at present is 2 per cent?

Mr. Darling: I shall deal with the various points raised by my hon. Friend. I think that I am right in saying that he has a hostility towards private funded schemes, which, frankly, I do not share. Over the next 25 years, pensioners as a whole—although not the poorest—are likely to retire on higher incomes, in part because of the growth in occupational pensions, which essentially are private pensions.

It is true that there have been problems with mis-selling, but the industry as a whole sells products that are very good for very many people. However, I believe that people are far better off if they can save through a funded pension than they ever would be if they relied on the state.

My hon. Friend returned to the question of the basic state pension. I shall not labour the point, other than to say yet again that I and my colleagues took the decision that it is far better to use the money at our disposal to help those on lower incomes—some might think disproportionately—to ensure that they have a proper pension on retirement.

My hon. Friend asked what can be done about the 19-year-olds who would rather go out and enjoy themselves than pay money into a pension. If those 19-year-olds earn less than £9,000 a year, compelling them to save quite a lot of money from that income will not make much difference. By the age of 25, those young people may be earning more money and therefore be more amenable to facing up to the future.

However, for the avoidance of doubt, I repeat that hon. Members who believe in blanket compulsion should think about what would happen if such compulsion were applied. It would not help the lowest paid, but would penalise those very well-off people who do not need to save more. It would increase the burden on people who already have enough pressure from children, mortgages and so on and who are not in a position to meet the requirement for extra compulsory help. What I am proposing is workable, affordable and acceptable, and therefore I believe that it will be durable.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I warmly welcome the Government's recognition of the circumstances of carers and of the contribution that they make to society, but is not the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn) right to say that people must begin to contribute to pensions virtually as they start work? If that is not to be achieved through compulsion—I sympathise with both sides of the debate on that matter—could not the Secretary of State offer people more flagrant, blatant and obvious fiscal encouragement to save for pensions rather than for, say, a car?

Mr. Darling: I appreciate that hon. Members suffer from a disadvantage in responding to Government statements, and that they are not always able read 100 pages of the relevant Green Paper beforehand. However, if the hon. Gentleman does get the chance to look at it, he will find that it contains incentives to encourage those earning moderate and higher incomes to go into funded pensions. I think that he will welcome the quite substantial rebates that are available.

I shall certainly not hold out the hope of more handouts of money, and it is unusual for Conservatives—or, at least, it used to be—to call for that. It cannot be justified, but increased incentives are available. People who say, "Let's compel 19-year-olds," should first ask themselves how much a 19-year-old has got, how much we could compel them and what difference it would make. A combination of all the measures that we are proposing, not least the annual pension statement, will concentrate minds as has not happened before.

Mr. Michael Clapham (Barnsley, West and Penistone): My right hon. Friend will be aware that, at present, about 1 million people are in work and have access to an occupational pension scheme but do not join it. He will also be aware that, in 1988, the Tory Government changed the rules, which was a disaster for occupational pension schemes, as employees were allowed to move away from salary-based to money-purchase schemes, which do not provide a minimum pension. As the hon. Member for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) said, such schemes are linked to an annuity, and go up and down with shares. Therefore, will my right hon. Friend consider how he might encourage those 1 million people back into occupational schemes, perhaps by encouraging employees to return to salary-based schemes?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend makes a good point, and the Green Paper covers it. He is right to say that the

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previous Government allowed people to opt out of pensions and many people have made no provision. In the Green Paper, we are saying that that situation is clearly unsatisfactory. For some people, an occupational scheme may be a bad deal, especially if they will be with a firm for only two or three years, but we are saying that, if they are not in the occupational scheme, they have to have a good reason—in other words, some other pension provision. We do not agree with the idea that people can simply bail out, enjoy themselves and expect others to pick up the pieces. That was one of the many things that the Conservative party did in the 1980s that is deeply regretted.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Clearly, the Green Paper must be read carefully, scrutinised and responded to—hopefully, constructively. I must pursue one matter with the Secretary of State. One concern that has been brought to my attention is that carers who reach pensionable age find that the state pension impacts on other benefits, such as attendance allowance. Will they be considered as special cases? The plans are long-term, but that group of carers has been cruelly treated under the old system.

Mr. Darling: I understand the hon. Lady's point. For carers who were in receipt of invalid care allowance, or who qualified for home responsibilities protection by caring for people on attendance allowance or disability living allowance, there will be qualifying credits back to 1978.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Would the Secretary of State explain why he has linked not the state pension but the minimum income guarantee with average earnings? Is that why he is proposing a reduction in the public contribution—as opposed to individual contributions—to pensions over a 50-year period? Will he estimate how much more money people on low incomes will be paying towards their pensions compared with the amount that they are paying now through national insurance?

Mr. Darling: If my hon. Friend looks at the Green Paper—I appreciate that he has not yet had the opportunity to do so—he will find that we are spending more on pensions, even though the share of national income declines. We have embarked on that course of action rather than restoring the earnings link because I want to ensure that the most help goes to people on lower incomes, rather than spreading the money thinly among everyone, as some people do not need it. I am ready to defend, for as long as it takes, the idea that the Government ought to be in the business of helping those at the lower end of the income scale. That ought to be, and will be, our priority.

Mr. Roy Beggs (East Antrim): I welcome the proposals outlined by the Secretary of State, in that they will encourage those who can help themselves to help themselves further and that help is offered to those who cannot help themselves. I particularly welcome the support that will be provided for mothers and carers. However, will the Secretary of State comment on what the future holds for widows?

Mr. Darling: We set out our proposal on widows benefits and widows pensions two or three weeks ago, and I am sure that the Vote Office still has a copy. It would take me rather longer than you would allow, Madam Speaker, to run through that matter again. However, I welcome the fact that the hon. Gentleman, almost alone among Opposition Members, has grasped what the Government are doing.

Ms Gisela Stuart (Birmingham, Edgbaston): I welcome the announcement that annual statements will be issued; it is a significant way of preventing the kind of robbery of SERPS that went on for 18 years under the previous Government and that reduced the value of SERPS without any particular outcry. I have two questions, the first of which relates to women and carers. How will my right hon. Friend's announcement affect the group of people who currently claim home care responsibility years? Secondly, are there are any provisions for people who do not have taxable incomes in current years to contribute towards their pensions?

Mr. Darling: The stakeholder pension gives greater flexibility: people will be able to contribute up to £3,600 to a stakeholder pension, and will be able to do so up to five years after stopping work, thus allowing for people who move occupations. For the first time, women carers will have access to a second pension, and I think that many people will welcome that.

My hon. Friend made a point about the annual statement that has not been mentioned this afternoon. My right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), who unfortunately has left the Chamber, spoke of his concerns that a future Government might take away the benefits that we are discussing. One advantage of giving everyone an annual statement is that, if the Conservatives were ever to be re-elected and were to pinch people's pensions, the statements would show a debit. There would be an entry "What the Tories took away", and people would notice that the money had gone. That is another reason for welcoming the statement.

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): Will not the Secretary of State's decision to focus his resources on those at the bottom end of the spectrum have exactly the same effect on incentives as the mistaken changes made by the Conservative Government in 1988? Specifically, what would he say to those people on small, modest occupational pensions whose funds were raided by the taxman last year and who now find that those just a little below them in terms of income have the prospect of increased pensions?

Mr. Darling: The hon. Gentleman has missed the point. If he examines the proposals, he will see that the help that we are giving is not only to those on low incomes, but to those on moderate incomes. They will all get help in different ways, because of the way in which we are reforming SERPS and replacing it with the second state pension. He is quite wrong to say that help will go only to the poorest pensioners; that is not the case. The hon. Gentleman does have a point, if I understand him

correctly, when he says that people with modest savings or modest occupational pensions could find that they start to lose benefit. In the Green Paper, we stated that we wanted to address that problem.

On corporation tax, I remind the hon. Gentleman that the Labour Government have cut corporation tax by 2p in the pound, which will increase company profitability. Companies will actually gain from us; therefore, pensions will gain from what we have done.

Mr. John McAllion (Dundee, East): My right hon. Friend will know that the guaranteed minimum income is set at a level that will require a pensioner couple to survive on a joint annual income that is significantly less than that of a single person earning the national minimum wage. It is set at an absolutely minimal level. Does he recall the Commission on Social Justice set up by the late John Smith, which recommended that the guaranteed minimum income should be set at a level above income support and that it should be linked to average earnings? Will he tell us why the guaranteed minimum income has not been set at that level; why the link with earnings has been postponed until the longer term; and exactly what he means by the longer term?

Mr. Darling: My hon. Friend should be aware that the increase given to the poorest pensioners through the minimum income guarantee is the largest that there has been. Furthermore, I think that he would accept that we inherited a situation in which, after 18 years, pensions, especially those of the poorest, had been fairly run down. Consistent with our overall responsibility to ensure that the public finances are properly run, we put the available money towards increasing the minimum income guarantee for the poorest pensioners. We took a deliberate decision to do that.

What I am saying—I choose my words carefully, as I do not want to hold out false promises—is that our objective in the long term, consistent with prudent economic management, is to increase the minimum income guarantee in line with earnings, so that we raise the benchmark. We want to beat that benchmark, but it will be raised in such a way that pensioners benefit.

I fully accept that, for today's pensioners, that will take time, but my announcement this afternoon is designed not to deal with the situation for the next five to 10 years, but for the next 50 years. However, I hope that, by the end of this Parliament, my hon. Friend and everyone else will agree that the Labour Government have done a great deal to help today's pensioners, as well as providing security for tomorrow's pensioners.

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): Why does the right hon. Gentleman keep evading the means-testing issue? Does he not realise that the great savings tragedy in this country today is that those on average earnings or lower—£15,000 or £18,000 a year—would be completely barmy to save, as they would deprive themselves of thousands of pounds a year in means-tested benefits upon their retirement? Does the right hon. Gentleman not realise that, by increasing income support for pensioners at a faster rate than the state retirement pension, he will make the problem worse? He will increase the potential loss for anybody on a modest income who saves, and the income threshold below which it makes no sense to save will continue to increase to higher and higher income levels.

Mr. Darling: I rather suspect that the hon. Gentleman thought up his question several hours ago—certainly before he read our proposals. I make it abundantly clear—the hon. Gentleman seemed to grasp this point earlier—that people who earn as much as £15,000 a year are heading for retirement on income support because of the policies left us by the Tories. For the hon. Gentleman to complain—

Mr. Duncan Smith: You are changing that.

Mr. Darling: Of course we are, because we do not want that to happen. We are reforming the pensions system to ensure that people who have worked all their lives do not have to face retirement on means-tested benefits. That is abundantly clear to everyone. I am sorry that the Conservative party is now committed to abolishing not only the state pension but mean-tested benefits as well. It is only the Conservative party that has absolutely nothing to say about this matter. The Conservatives had 18 years in which to sort out the pensions problem, but they did nothing about it. They simply presided over massive mis-selling and gross irresponsibility. In contrast, our system is affordable, workable, deliverable—and, I believe, durable as well.

Orders of the Day

Greater London Authority Bill

Order read for resuming adjourned debate on amendment to Question [14 December], That the Bill be now read a Second time.

Which amendment was, to leave out from "That" to the end of the Question, and to add instead thereof:

"this House, while welcoming the proposal for a directly elected mayor for Greater London, declines to give a Second Reading to the Greater London Authority Bill because, instead of creating an Assembly consisting of representatives nominated by each London borough and the Corporation of London, which would best serve London's interests, it provides for the establishment of a directly elected Assembly which would diminish the status of the London boroughs and would be likely to lead to conflict between the boroughs and the Greater London Authority; and because, in failing to provide for the transfer of London Underground to the private sector so as to boost investment and in proposing the imposition of new taxes on motorists in London to pay for cuts in central government spending, the Bill offers an inadequate response to the problems of transport in London."—*[Mrs. Shephard.]*

Question again proposed, That the amendment be made.

4.37 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): Londoners are justly proud of their city. It is our national capital, and one of the foremost cities in the world. It is famed for its diversity and for its financial and business might. It is a cultural magnet for the rest of Europe and well beyond. London's history, museums, monuments and restaurants draw visitors in their millions.

Yet, in spite of all those strengths, London's governance is a mess. Difficult decisions are not taken and no one is able to provide Londonwide solutions to Londonwide problems such as pollution, poverty and the crumbling transport infrastructure. Uniquely among major cities, London has no leader. How is our capital supposed to continue to compete with New York, Paris and Tokyo when it has no one to speak for it?

Yesterday, my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister spelled out the overall case for the creation of a mayor and an assembly for Greater London. Today, I want to concentrate on parts VI and VII of the Bill, which make relatively minor changes to the London fire and emergency planning authority and very significant changes to the accountability of the Metropolitan police.

I shall deal first with the fire authority. Our proposals in part VII for setting up the London fire and emergency planning authority recognise that the present authority is already a strategic and representative body for the whole of London and that the present arrangements work well, so our changes here are relatively prosaic. The new authority will be a reconstituted form of the present authority and will inherit its staff, functions and powers. However, it will have a smaller membership of 17—just over half the existing number. The majority of members will be assembly representatives appointed by the mayor. The rest will be representatives of the London boroughs. Like all fire authorities, it will remain democratically accountable to local people. The proposed arrangements will provide streamlined decision making and will establish a clear relationship between the mayor, the assembly and the authority.

Part VI is concerned with the Metropolitan police, who are also covered by clauses 80 and 81 on finance and schedules 16 and 17. The Metropolitan police authority will be the first police authority for London to be democratically accountable to Londoners. That step is long overdue. It is right in principle, and it should improve the way in which we tackle crime and disorder in the capital.

Before justifying those statements, I shall describe some of the key staging posts in the history of the Metropolitan police. Sir Robert Peel was the architect of the Metropolitan Police Act 1829 which established the force. That Act made provision for two justices with powers to direct and control the force, under the authority of the Home Secretary. Two justices—or commissioners, as they were soon to be called—were duly appointed: Charles Rowan and Richard Mayne, who worked in tandem for the next 21 years. Even today, the offices of Metropolitan Police Commissioner and deputy Commissioner are civilian posts. Only in the force's post-war history has the Commissioner been a police officer.

I was looking at the portraits in New Scotland Yard and reminding myself that the Commissioner appointed in 1945 had been the permanent under-secretary in the Home Office immediately beforehand. He was wedged into a uniform and put in charge of the Metropolitan police.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Typical Labour fix.

Mr. Straw: I suspect that it was a Conservative fix, or a coalition fix. The tradition before that had been that Commissioners and deputy Commissioners were appointed from the armed forces, and it is only since the war that police officers have run the force at Commissioner level, but they are still considered to be civilians. That is one of many anomalies that the Bill will sweep away.

When Peel proposed an organised police force for London, many people objected, as they had done for decades. In 1785, just three years after the post of Home Secretary was established, such was the opposition to a London police force that William Pitt had been obliged to drop a Bill similar to that passed in 1829. Between those dates, some minor advances were made. The Middlesex Justices Act 1792 provided for seven mini police forces, each under a magistrates office, to add to the existing Bow street office. In 1800, the Thames river police brought a further dimension to the capital's policing.

Those were ad hoc changes. There was still no unified, organised police force. Numerous parliamentary committees, including an 1822 Select Committee, rejected the idea of such a force, despite huge panic across the country about the mob behaviour and disorder that followed the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815. It was argued left and right that any benefits that might accrue from an organised police force would be outweighed by the loss of individual liberty.

Robert Peel was eventually able to secure his vision of a professional London police force. His determination was quickly rewarded. The doubts of the previous decades

evaporated as the advantages of the 1829 Act became apparent. David Thomson vividly describes the events in his book on "England in the Nineteenth Century", in which he says:

"By establishing very early contact with disorder rather than waiting until it had grown too great to be quelled without bloodshed; by preventing mobs from forming rather than trying to disperse them after they had formed; by creating a spirit of civilian co-operation with the public in the common cause of good order; above all by making the detection and punishment of offenders more inevitable and certain, Peel's police conferred an immense boon on the whole country."

London's model was soon being exported elsewhere.

Mr. David Wilshire (Spelthorne): As the right hon. Gentleman knows, I am very supportive of the Metropolitan police, but he has twice referred to them as London's police force. Will he confirm that they never have been London's police force; they cover an area that includes my constituency and others that are not in London, have never been in London and whose people do not wish to be in London?

Mr. Straw: I understand that. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will approve of the fact that, following representations from him, his colleagues and Surrey county council, I have accepted that the boundaries of the new Metropolitan police force ought to be coterminous with those of the Greater London area.

As I was saying, London's model of policing was soon exported elsewhere, first to the boroughs of England by the Municipal Corporations Act 1835 and then to the rural areas by the County Police Act 1839. One notable difference was that the authority to which the police forces outside London were responsible was not the Home Secretary. In the case of the boroughs, it was to a watch committee whose members, until the Police Act 1964, were drawn entirely from the elected members of the municipal council, and elsewhere magistrates in the quarter sessions were empowered to set up a police force and to appoint constables.

Here began a divergence which has persisted to this day. Legislation has modified and updated the police authority structure outside London, while leaving the position of the Home Secretary as the police authority for London untouched. Why should this be so?

Back in 1829, there was considerable fragmentation in the government of London. I have already mentioned the fragmented policing arrangements, but local administration lay in the hands of 150 separate parishes, which were plainly in no position to oversee the activities of a single police force. It says something for the remarkable foresight of Peel that he was able to draw the boundaries of the Metropolitan police force wider even than those drawn in 1963 for the Greater London area, boundaries that we are now accepting. It was said that he drew the boundaries according to the distance that the Commissioner could travel on a horse in a single day.

The establishment of the London county council by the Local Government Act 1888 presented an opportunity for change. Some parliamentarians argued that the London county council should become the police authority. Indeed, Mr. Pickersgill, the Member of Parliament for Bethnal Green, S. W., observed:

"The second point, perhaps, which would attract the attention of the Metropolitan critic was this, that whilst the Metropolitan ratepayers were to provide for the cost of the police they were to have no control over them."—[*Official Report*, 13 April 1888; Vol. 324, c. 1255.]

That argument was hard to refute, but it did not win the day. The view was then taken that, because of the unique national and, indeed, imperial functions of the Met, the Home Secretary should remain the police authority. It should also be pointed out that the old LCC covered a much smaller area than the Metropolitan police district—poor alignment of boundaries is not just a modern curse.

The status quo again prevailed in 1962, when the royal commission on the police reported. It argued successfully that the forthcoming London Government Act 1963, which created the Greater London council, should not be used to change the Home Secretary's position. As a result, the Police Act 1964 left arrangements in London as they were.

Next came my own modest contribution to the debate about the policing of London. One of my first actions on entering the House in 1979 was to introduce a private Member's Bill—the Police Authorities (Powers) Bill—in which I proposed, among other things, a police authority for London. Once that Bill had died the usual early death suffered by such Bills, I resurrected my proposals early the next year in the 1980 Police Bill. What I said is something to which I still hold:

"I believe that experience has shown that in the Metropolitan area there is . . . insufficient accountability . . . through local representatives. That can be remedied only by having a Greater London police force responsible to a local and democratically elected police authority."—[*Official Report*, 11 March 1980; Vol. 980, c. 1156.]

There is one more chapter to record. On 23 March 1993, the right hon. and learned Gentleman the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), a former Home Secretary, told the House that the Government's police reform programme would include the creation of a new police authority for the Metropolitan police in line with the new national pattern. However, while the new national pattern duly emerged in the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994, it was not applied to the Metropolitan police area, because the new Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), had decided against the policy of his predecessor—not for the first or, indeed, the last time, either on police or many other issues.

I have run through this history because I think that it is important, when making a significant change of the kind now proposed, to understand how things came to be as they are; only then can we be sure whether the change is justified. On this occasion, I believe that the case for change is overwhelming. Moreover, I believe that, once the Metropolitan police authority is established, it will gain acceptance as rapidly as the idea of an organised police force did at the beginning of the previous century.

Let me explain why. First, there are grounds of principle. I quoted earlier a concern about the absence of accountability for the policing of London. As Home Secretary, I am an elected Member, but I am not elected by Londoners. I may claim—indeed, I do claim—many things for the outstanding town and borough of Blackburn, but not even I would dare to suggest that being the Member for that constituency is the best qualification for being London's police authority.

That point does not apply just to me. One has to go back about a quarter of a century to find the last Home Secretary representing a London constituency—Mr. Robert Carr, as he then was, who represented Mitcham and was in my post from 1972 to 1974. Policing

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has its roots in local communities. It follows that the police authority should have representatives from those communities. In London, that is not the case.

The Metropolitan police authority will address that accountability gap, and so will the provisions to alter the outer boundaries of the Metropolitan police district. For historical reasons that we have already discussed, those boundaries extend beyond the 32 London boroughs to parts of Essex, Hertfordshire and about a third of the administrative county of Surrey. In some parts of Surrey and Essex, the boundaries of the Metropolitan police service go slap bang through the middle of existing districts, which makes any effective partnership between the police and those districts more difficult, whatever the strength of will of police commanders and chief executives.

Mr. Wilshire: I ask the right hon. Gentleman to accept my thanks for the way in which he has handled that issue. It is a difficult matter for those of us outside Greater London. I hope that he will allow me to put it on the record that I support what he is suggesting for my constituency.

Is he aware that there has been close co-operation between the Metropolitan police and Surrey police and that the changes that he seeks to achieve are working well, but that, as I am sure he will understand, because he kindly saw me, his proposals will not work if there is not adequate finance? I am sure that he is aware that it is not his responsibility, but another Department's, but he will have a problem achieving what he seeks to achieve unless adequate money is available.

The sum of £7 million has been offered to Surrey, but the minimum cost of what the right hon. Gentleman seeks to achieve is £10 million. Will he use his best endeavours, as I seek to do, to get the financing sorted out, so that what he seeks to achieve and what my constituents support will be forthcoming?

Mr. Straw: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his thanks, which I know is full-hearted. I do not wish to be ungrateful, but I was anticipating that there was going to be a "but" in what he said. Indeed there was, and the "but" was about the money; not a great deal changes in terms of the role of Opposition, whoever fill that role.

There have been detailed discussions with Surrey. Indeed, I have made myself available to any right hon. and hon. Member and to district councillors to talk about the matter, as well as to county councillors. Each authority put forward bids for the transitional costs, and we looked at them. It will come as no surprise—it is also a timeless verity—to learn that our judgment about the amount needed for the transfer was less than the bid, but I still think that £7 million is adequate for the purpose. Of course, if the chief constable or the hon. Gentleman wishes to argue about it, I am happy to see them and to discuss that further.

Under the new arrangements, we shall at long last have police forces that fit within the administrative areas of county councils or metropolitan areas. That is to general benefit, and it is consistent with our overall approach of aligning criminal justice agency boundaries to improve the working relationships between those agencies and district councils.

I want to highlight my personal concerns about having to combine the position of Home Secretary with that of the police authority for the metropolitan area. There is, frankly, insufficient time to give the role of police authority the attention that it deserves. That view is shared by some former Home Secretaries of both parties to whom I have spoken.

Even more importantly, conflicts of interest can arise from having to act with both my Home Secretary and police authority hats on. The carefully designed system of checks and balances provided by the tripartite system for running the police service—the chief constable, the police authority and the Home Secretary—generally works well, and we are not proposing to disturb it. However, I believe that the system is bound to become confused when one person fulfils two roles.

One change that my immediate predecessor, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe, did make was to establish a Metropolitan Police Committee, an appointed body, to advise the Home Secretary on his role as police authority. I have been greatly assisted by that committee—for example, in the establishing of priorities for policing and in the approval of an annual performance plan. I should like to place on record my thanks to its members, and particularly to Sir John Quinton, its chairman.

Earlier this year, I decided to expand the committee by adding 10 new councillor members, nominated by the London Government Association. Despite all that, the essential fact remains that the Home Secretary's role as police authority is an inherently unsatisfactory one.

Opponents of change may argue that the Met is unique, and that that alone justifies a special degree of central Government oversight. Particular consideration in the past has been given to the national and international functions of the Met. Those national roles remain today, although they are not as widespread as they once were. The creation of separate national bodies, such as the National Crime Squad and the National Criminal Intelligence Service, is evidence of the changes that have been occurring.

The Home Secretary has a particular responsibility to Parliament for the exercise of national police functions. I have always accepted that the arrangements for London's policing must be tailored accordingly. The Bill achieves that. It does so, first, by providing for an agreement between the Home Secretary and the new authority through which the latter undertakes to ensure that the Met performs its national functions to an acceptable standard. Secondly, the Bill proposes to allow the Home Secretary to appoint directly one of the seven independent members of the authority with that person having a particular interest in the Met's national functions.

Those provisions, along with the other powers conferred on the Home Secretary under the Police Act 1996, provide adequate safeguards without the loss of accountability. Hon. Members who have read the Bill will notice that we have preserved the special position of the Commissioner and the deputy Commissioner. Those posts will continue to be royal appointments. The Secretary of State will have to approve a shortlist of candidates, and the mayor will have the chance to offer a view about the list, but the MPA will choose a single candidate for consideration by the Secretary of State and for approval by Her Majesty.

The size of the Met has also been cited as a reason why it might be too dangerous to loosen the grip of central Government. That, too, is less of an issue today. When the royal commission reported in 1962, there were 156 police forces outside London. Most of them had fewer than 1,000 officers in their force and many had fewer than 500. One Shetland force had just 18 officers, but many of the borough forces had fewer than 200. The largest single force was Lancashire, with just over 3,000. That contrasted with the 20,000-strong force in the Metropolitan area. Today, following the reorganisations that took place in the 1960s, all but one of the 41 forces outside London have over 1,000 police officers; 13 have over 3,000; and two—the West Midlands and Greater Manchester—are over a quarter of the size of the Met.

The police authority model set up under the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994 has shown itself able to cope with those larger forces. I do not believe that the size of the Met will present insuperable problems. The new MPA will have 23 members, rather than the normal 17 elsewhere, and this should prove sufficient to discharge its functions.

Perhaps the final argument against the creation of the MPA is that it may bring no tangible benefits to Londoners. Well, I would certainly accept that, in the great majority of what it does, the Met performs very well. The latest recorded crime statistics bear testimony to that and we all need to remember it. The figures show that crime in the Met continues to fall. Overall crime is down 8 per cent., burglary is down 16 per cent., robbery is down 19 per cent., vehicle crime is down by 11 per cent., and violence against the person is down 5 per cent. Operations such as Bumblebee and Eagle Eye have demonstrated the Met's ability to get to grips with serious crime problems. Home Office research has shown that London continues to enjoy one of the lowest homicide rates in Europe or north America. London's homicide rate is three times lower than that of Amsterdam, and eight times lower than that of New York city.

I applaud, too, many of the more recent developments in the Met, not least developments on the very important issues of how police deal with racial and violent crime. The House will understand that I cannot comment on the proceedings of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry. However, I can say how much I welcome both the commitment of the Commissioner and his senior management team to building a truly anti-racist service, and the appointment of assistant Commissioner John Grieve to lead the racial and violent crime task force.

The Commissioner also has my support for his strategy of moving to borough-based policing and putting the emphasis of policing where it belongs—at the local level. It is important to have effective structures in place also above the borough level, and the Commissioner is considering that point, in consultation with interested parties and his criminal justice parties. He favours reducing the current number of areas from five to three, possibly with an intermediate tier comprising three or four borough command units grouped together under one commander.

I congratulate the Met on what it has achieved and is attempting to achieve. I believe also that more could be done if the service's accountability to the population it serves was more deeply rooted in the community it serves.

The Government's overall approach to tackling crime and disorder is based on partnership and community involvement. Giving local people and relevant organisations a say in how the community is policed unquestionably bring results. Loss of community support and involvement is a very difficult obstacle to overcome.

The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 and our proposals on best value are two examples of our approach of rooting policing in the local community. The 1998 Act places a statutory duty on local authorities and the police service, in conjunction with other bodies, to conduct a thorough audit of local crime and disorder problems by consulting widely in the community, to propose a strategy for dealing with those problems and to audit the strategies' effect. The Metropolitan police authority will be subject to the Act's consultation requirements, and will therefore be able to play its full part in the crime and disorder partnerships—which will be strengthened by coterminosity, at borough level, of police and local government boundaries.

The authority will be subject also to the best value duty that we are proposing to place on all police authorities under the provisions of the Local Government (Best Value and Capping) Bill.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I am, as ever, reluctant to strike any negative or sour note. However, I point out to the Home Secretary that there is a distinct possibility that Chislehurst police station in my constituency will close very soon. I am told by the assistant Commissioner that police may be forced directly by the Home Secretary's budget allocations to close that police station. Against the background of the Home Secretary's comments in this debate—on community involvement, strengthening police effectiveness and so on—will he tell me how I should explain to the people of Chislehurst that closing their police station will make policing in their community more effective?

Mr. Straw: I should expect nothing else but for the right hon. Gentleman to strike a discordant note—he did so with his own Front Benchers when they were in government, and he does so now. The first thing that I should expect him to say to his electors is that the current year's police budget and last year's, for 1997-98, were based on the budget set by the previous Administration—*[Interruption.]* It is no good Opposition Members groaning about it; it is true. The only change that I made to the Metropolitan police service was to give it a little more money than it anticipated receiving from my predecessor as Home Secretary. That is the truth of it.

As for this year's settlement, the precept for London has not yet been set. I therefore have no idea how the police service in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) can be speculating about the effects of budget changes that have been not been established. It is a fair settlement.

The other thing that the right hon. Gentleman should point out to his constituents is that the police settlement for London, and for all the United Kingdom, is far in excess of anything that would have been provided by a Government whom he would have supported. Of that there is absolutely no doubt. We know it to be the case, because the shadow Chancellor has damned our spending plans, including those for the police—not because we are spending too little, but because we are spending too much.

[Mr. Straw]

The right hon. Gentleman should tell the people of Chislehurst that his shadow Chancellor said that our spending plans are reckless. Had the right hon. Gentleman's party been in power, it would not just have been the closure of Chislehurst police station, but the police service generally would have been denuded across London and throughout the country. I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his intervention; it has made me feel a lot better.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley): A calming question. The Home Secretary mentioned the precept. As I understand it, the inner-London magistrates courts probation services are covered by the precept, so there are numerous questions about what will happen under the Bill, as it makes no mention of them.

Mr. Straw: The hon. Gentleman need not worry; we intend to deal with that—[HON. MEMBERS: "Ah."] This Bill is about changing the way that the police service is funded and controlled. We have other proposals for the future of the probation service—as the hon. Member for Mole Valley (Sir P. Beresford) will know, because he pays assiduous attention to these matters—which were included in a consultative document that I published in the summer, on 8 August. We are proposing changes in the way that that service operates in London. I made it clear that we are minded to move from five separate probation services to a single service to cover the Greater London area. It would therefore be coterminous with a court service, the Crown Prosecution Service and the MPA.

Other hon. Members wish to speak in the debate—

Sir Paul Beresford *rose—*

Mr. Straw: I have already given way to the hon. Gentleman.

I want to say something about the relationship between the GLA and the MPA. The existence of a mayor and an assembly adds a dimension to the policing of London which is not present elsewhere. We have modelled the MPA's membership and functions on those of police authorities outside London, and have remained faithful to the tripartite structure. However, it is also right that the MPA should reflect the existence of this pan-London structure of assembly. After all, it was the absence of a Londonwide local government body in 1829 that contributed to the otherwise anomalous policing arrangements we see in London today.

The mayor will be involved through his or her appointment of 12 assembly members, including the deputy mayor, to the police authority. He or she will also be able to make representations on the list of candidates put forward for the office of the Metropolitan Commissioner. Equally importantly, as two high-profile London figures, the mayor and Commissioner will want to establish an effective working relationship. As for the assembly, it will provide a majority of the MPA membership. It will also be required to hold meetings at which it can put questions to the MPA about the discharge of its functions.

Jointly, the mayor and the assembly will set the budget of the MPA as part of the single financial structure created by the Bill. However, to ensure that the policing of London is not put at risk, the Home Secretary will have the explicit power—a wider power than that which exists in the Police Acts—to set a minimum budget, sufficient to provide an efficient and effective police force.

In summary, there will be two bodies—the GLA and the MPA—working together. The two bodies will be accountable to the people of London, and will deliver benefits on their behalf. The new arrangements should mean improved policing on the streets. By harnessing the views and ideas of local people, and working with Londoners to reduce crime, they should contribute to creating a safer and more secure environment for the people of London. I commend the Bill.

5.9 pm

Sir Norman Fowler (Sutton Coldfield): One of the interesting sub-plots of this debate so far has been the parade of potential candidates for mayor of London—a parade in which the Home Secretary and I are non-marchers.

In yesterday's debate, the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) said:

"I also hope that I can look forward to seeing the Deputy Prime Minister campaign at my side in my struggle to become the Labour party candidate."

I am not very good at judging body language, but the way that the Deputy Prime Minister went a dangerous colour of beetroot red and muttered audibly, "I'll campaign for the Labour party candidate," did not automatically lead us to the conclusion that the prospect filled him with enormous enthusiasm.

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I do not have the same recollection of what happened last night. The Deputy Prime Minister's response was that he would campaign for the Labour candidate who would be the next mayor of London.

Sir Norman Fowler: The hon. Gentleman ought to concentrate. That is exactly what I said.

Next, we had the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who said:

"I make it clear that I have a further interest in that I intend in the new year to put my name forward for selection, and possibly therefore election, to the Greater London authority."

Asked in what capacity, the hon. Gentleman replied:

"That is not a matter for today."—[*Official Report*, 14 December 1998; Vol. 322 , c.647, 651.]

I did not see the Deputy Prime Minister's reaction, but, as he winces every time the question of closer links between the Labour party and the Liberal Democrats is raised, I would guess that he is not greatly in favour of that solution either.

The third potential candidate is still to come. According to Michael White in *The Guardian*, the Minister for London and Construction, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford), has emerged as a "late runner for mayor". Mr. White also comments—quite unfairly—

"critics say the balding and bespectacled 53 year old lacks the charisma to be Mr. London".

We all agree that that is unfair. Mr. White concedes, however, that the hon. Gentleman is

"very voter friendly on the doorstep".

We look forward to the hon. Gentleman's campaign speech.

There is a serious point to be made about the selection of candidates for mayor, and, indeed, for the assembly. In October 1997, the Government Office for London—that is, the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—asked Professor Dunleavy and Dr. Margetts to examine some of the issues involved in the election of the London mayor. One of their recommendations was central to this debate. They said:

"The responses of political parties to the new voting systems will greatly affect the legitimacy of the systems with the public. There is a case for Government intervention to guarantee the use of one member one vote procedures in the selection of party candidates".

Conservative Members would have no difficulty with that proposal; nor, I think, would the Liberal Democrats. The system proposed by the Government, however, seems so designed to prevent the candidacy of the hon. Member for Brent, East that he has warned the Prime Minister that he will organise an American-style write-in campaign if the party hierarchy in the capital keeps his name off the short list. As for the system that I think the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) was defending, the hon. Member for Brent, East has said—this did not strike me as a complete endorsement of his policy, although he may think differently—

"They have ignored the mandate of their own membership. I hope no one is going to need hospitalisation. One was aware at the weekend of bone-crunching pressures being applied to people".

I feel that, to put it at its mildest, the Labour party still has some way to go to meet the spirit of the report that the Government themselves commissioned. Doubtless, when he sums up the debate, the Minister will wish to emphasise his determination that a "one member, one vote" system should obtain, so that obvious candidates are not excluded from the selection. *[Interruption.]* I am an enthusiastic friend of my noble Friend Lord Archer, and it would be quite improper to say that he is here.

Two important points arise from the Home Secretary's speech. One relates to the policing of London. The right hon. Gentleman went into the history of the Metropolitan police in some detail, and he was right to do so. The force was first organised in 1829, which is a tribute to Robert Peel. The Home Secretary should also have told us:

"At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the very word 'police' was virtually unknown in England; a position which led one French visitor to complain: 'How can one expect order among these people who have not such a word as police in their language?'"

All that is set out in an excellent book that I wrote on the history of the police.

The Home Secretary proposes that he should cease to be the police authority for the Metropolitan police and that he should be replaced by a new police authority that would include 12 assembly members. So about half the assembly members will sit on the police authority.

As the Home Secretary said, in 1993 my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) expressed some reservations about that proposal when he said:

"It is not proposed that there should be a police authority in the same way as for other forces because of the special national interest in the work of the Metropolitan police."

I shall not repeat the arguments, as the Home Secretary knows them well.

We shall consider the proposal in depth in Committee, so I shall concentrate on one or two fundamental issues that surround the change. The first question should be: what do the public want of their police? Of course they want a force that is close to them and good relations to exist between police and public—that is, with all groups in the population. Good community relations always have been an integral part of policing.

In terms of international comparisons, no one can seriously accuse the Metropolitan police of falling down on that duty. Of course there are exceptions where cases have been handled badly and individuals have been unfairly treated, but in my view they are very much the exception. In other police forces around the world and certainly in Europe, the Metropolitan police is held up as an example of a force with good public relations.

The Home Secretary is always rather churlish about my books—

Mr. Straw: I have not read that one.

Sir Norman Fowler: Then there is a treat in store for him. In one, I compared the British police—particularly the Metropolitan police—with police forces in other European countries.

Mr. Straw: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Norman Fowler: Let me finish citing the example.

The result was that the London police were seen as the model of how a police force should be organised. That is not by any means a case for being complacent, but it serves to put the issue in some context.

As well as good relations, the public want effective policing. They want crimes investigated, crime prevention undertaken and burglars, robbers and muggers detected and convicted. The Home Secretary is the police authority for just one force—the Metropolitan police—but what happens in that force has a pervasive effect on every police force in the country. The advantage of having the Home Secretary as police authority is that there is no one else to blame when the objectives of tackling crime are not achieved. The buck stops with him.

Irrespective of whether or not we have a new police authority, the financial levers of power remain with the Home Secretary. Of course they are crucial in achieving an effective police service. That is not the case in other countries.

In New York, which has roughly the same population as London, a proactive policing policy has reduced crime dramatically—in the past four years, it has fallen by 40 per cent. A few weeks ago, I visited the New York police, and, while I was in the city, the *New York Times* carried a survey showing that 60 per cent. of the public believed that life in the city had improved thanks almost exclusively to more effective policing.

In the past five years, the incidence of crime in London has also fallen. The Metropolitan police and, indeed, the Home Secretary's predecessor deserve credit for that. What is fundamentally different between the two cities is that, as a prelude to New York's attack on crime, the

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mayor ordered the recruitment of 7,000 more police officers. Without that, it would have been impossible to implement the so-called zero tolerance policy.

In London, the contrast could not have been greater. The strength of the Metropolitan police has increased since 1979, when the force numbered 22,000; when the Conservative Government left office, it numbered 26,700. However, numbers are now falling. Indeed, many people predict that, over the next three years, the numbers in the Metropolitan police could fall to 24,000, 23,000 or even 22,000, which was the number in 1979.

We listened with some care to what the Home Secretary said about finances. In fact, between 1979 and 1997, resources for the police service increased by more than 70 per cent. in real terms; as my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire) said, that was what made the growth of the police service possible. Now, however, although there is an increase in cash terms, there is no real increase whatever.

Despite the fact that there will be a new police authority, responsibility for what happens in London will continue to rest heavily with the Home Office and the Home Secretary. In Committee, we shall have to consider carefully what improvement the change will make. The acid test will be what best serves the public interest. We are prepared to suspend judgment on that, but we reserve the right to reconsider the matter.

On constitutional change—

Mr. Wilshire: Before my right hon. Friend moves on from the police, will he assure me that, when he seeks the support of Conservative Members for the changes that he wants to make to the Bill, he will not ask us to oppose the proposals to make the Metropolitan police boundary the same as that for Greater London?

Sir Norman Fowler: I give my hon. Friend a categorical undertaking on that.

On constitutional change, the position is much clearer. Neither the Deputy Prime Minister nor the Home Secretary seems to have examined the subject in much detail. One of the main themes in the debate about London has been the make-up of the new assembly, and the role of the new mayor. Labour Members have suggested that our proposal for an assembly made up of borough leaders is unworkable. It is odd that, when we consider the make-up of a new second Chamber—the Chamber to replace the House of Lords—one of the favourite proposals is that a substantial number of its members should come from the regional assemblies. On 12 December, *The Herald* of Glasgow reported that the Lord Chancellor had said:

"The Scottish Parliament could be given the task of electing Scottish members of the reformed House of Lords".

The argument is that such a system would provide a form of unity and avoid the creation of unconnected layer after unconnected layer of government. It is the same argument that my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) advanced yesterday.

Mr. Straw: I had the experience—I make this point in the most non-partisan way I can—of serving on the old Inner London education authority, which was partly made up in the way that the right hon. Gentleman proposes: it comprised the Greater London members for the inner London boroughs, plus one borough representative from each of the 12 boroughs.

ILEA was set up by the London Government Act 1963, and both major parties tried to make it work. However, as a borough representative, I thought that the system was inherently unsatisfactory; we were not clear to whom we were accountable. The same would be true even if borough leaders were put on a Greater London authority. The right hon. Gentleman's proposals would not create a sense of unity; the experiences of people of both parties who served on ILEA suggest that the new body should be directly elected.

Sir Norman Fowler: I hear what the Home Secretary says, but I do not agree. The Government's approach illustrates one of the difficulties inherent in the debate; their plans for constitutional change are not joined up. Different electoral systems and different kinds of constituencies are proposed—party lists are taking the place of named-candidate lists in some elections, and there are enormous gaps in the constitutional plan. For example, no one knows how the second Chamber will be constituted—for the very good reason that the Government do not know. We heard vague words yesterday about regional assemblies but, in practice, we know that the only change outside London will be the introduction of unelected regional development agencies. On the basis of the Bill, our proposals for London seem to be looking stronger and stronger by the minute.

For the assembly, according to the White Paper, the Government are working on the premise that

"assembly members will be required to think and act strategically, looking at London-wide issues in the round and at the long-term interests of the capital. They do not nor should they duplicate the local representational roles of borough councillors, MPs and MEPs."

Let us be clear—we can now eliminate Members of the European Parliament from that list. No one pretends that the party list system that the Government have chosen for the European elections will provide truly local representation at that level. The loyalty of the Member of the European Parliament will be to the party, not to the local public. That is the basic argument that we have made, and will continue to make.

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): Before the right hon. Gentleman digs himself further into a hole, will he reflect on the views of the London boroughs? Is he aware that the Association of London Government has stated clearly that it does not share the Opposition's view that the assembly should be made up of London borough leaders? The chairman of the ALG has said that the role of the assembly should not be confused with the local role of London borough councillors. Is not that a clear example of what London boroughs think? Will the right hon. Gentleman realise that he is wrong?

Sir Norman Fowler: No, I will not. The Minister is always guided by such representational views. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh!"] In an *Evening Standard* survey of the boroughs to which he referred, only five of the 19 Labour council leaders gave their enthusiastic backing to the Prime Minister's idea. Four refused to comment, or said

that they had not made up their minds. Ten were against the proposals. That was in 1997. My hon. Friend the Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) will deal with parts of the letter to which the Minister referred.

I wish that the Minister would deal with the argument, and not for ever seek to quote people as if that settled the matter. It does not. The argument is flawed in the first place. Duplication takes place only if functions are duplicated; that must be the case, surely. The Government, however, say that that is not the case, and that functions are different. Why have the Government adopted different systems in Scotland and Wales? In Scotland and Wales, those who represent assembly constituencies will be the same as those representing parliamentary constituencies. Why are not the Government adopting that system for the elected assembly for London?

Mr. Raynsford: I must tell the right hon. Gentleman that we have adopted exactly the same electoral system in London as in Scotland and Wales—the additional member system, with some members elected for constituencies and some from a party list. Clearly, the right hon. Gentleman is not terribly well versed in those constitutional matters, which are all completely consistent.

Sir Norman Fowler: The Minister has a great future as an estate agent, having given such an answer. He knows perfectly well that I was talking about the constituencies—the coterminosity of Members to constituencies.

I am delighted to respond to the other point, about the electoral system. My basic fear is that, when the Government talk about thinking and acting strategically, that means that the assembly will be remote from the public whom it intends to serve. That danger would be averted if our proposal were adopted.

The Government propose 25 assembly members, 14 of whom will be elected by first past the post. They will represent not areas that are coterminous with parliamentary constituencies, but massive constituencies with between 300,000 and 400,000 voters. That makes the assembly far more remote than Parliament or a local council.

The second eleven will be elected on a Londonwide basis, not by first past the post but through a form of proportional representation. They will be elected from a party list. Just when we thought it was safe to come out of the shelter, the Government are set for a new battle on the open and closed lists. The proposed system is precisely the same as the system for the European elections. That is why the Home Secretary did not refer to it.

Generally, the public will vote not for a named candidate but for a party. They can vote for named independent candidates but not named party candidates. The party will choose the order in which candidates will be elected, and the public will have no choice. For example, the Labour party organisation might put the name Raynsford at No. 1 and, with luck, the name Livingstone at No. 11; and party members might put the name Livingstone at No. 1 and, with luck, the name Raynsford at No. 11; but what is certain under the proposals is that the one group that will have no say in the order will be the electors themselves. They will not be able to re-order the party candidates.

Once again, we have all the other drawbacks of the party list. If a candidate fails in his constituency bid because of his unpopularity with the public, he can always get on the party list. Under the list system, there will be nothing as inconvenient as by-elections to replace someone who resigns or dies: the next man or woman on the list will simply be appointed. That is what the Government propose.

Again, we are witnessing a transfer of power from the public to the party organisation. The only change is that the arrangement has now been condemned by at least two reports. It was certainly condemned by the Jenkins commission on electoral reform, which has published its report since the White Paper was issued. The report said:

"The Commission recommends that the second vote determining the allocation of Top-up members should allow the voter the choice of either a vote for the party or for an individual candidate from the lists put forward by parties. They should therefore be what are commonly called open rather than closed lists."

Mr. Straw: Is the right hon. Gentleman defending Jenkins?

Sir Norman Fowler: If the right hon. Gentleman wants to destroy Jenkins, I would certainly join him.

Mr. Straw: I was merely asking whether the Conservative party was now moving from outright opposition to Jenkins to Jenkins a la carte.

Sir Norman Fowler: We have made our proposals. I was seeking to demonstrate—I did so conclusively, I believe—how inconsistent the Government are. They set up the Jenkins commission, and when it reports they propose a different system.

I know that the Home Secretary has a hang-up about Roy Jenkins and all that, but Jenkins was not the only one to oppose the closed list. The Scottish Affairs Select Committee, in its report only a few weeks ago on what it descriptively calls

"the operation of multi-layer democracy",

said:

"We feel that an open list would be more in keeping with the principle of trusting the people and giving them the maximum choice."

It seems to me that the practical effect of what is happening is that, step by step, the Government are giving more and more power to the political organisations and less and less to the public. By one measure after another, the whole focus is beginning to change. Elected representatives will be answerable to the party bosses much more directly than they will be to the local public.

We do not support closed lists. The case against them has been stated thus:

"Where PR is based on the list system, with votes effectively cast for a party, and the winning candidates taken, pro rata, from each party's list, power passes from the individual constituency party to those who draw up the list."

Those are not my words, but those of the current Home Secretary in an article in *The Times* in September 1985. *[Interruption.]* If the Home Secretary does not listen, he will miss the quotations.

The analogy with Northern Ireland has always been a bogus one, because the Government know that that system was introduced to meet the special needs of Northern

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Ireland, as specifically explained by the then Prime Minister. The debate on the European parliamentary elections showed that there is little support in the House for closed lists, and I can tell the Government that we will oppose that proposal with all our strength.

Who will benefit from the new system? The answer was given by the Home Secretary in his 1985 article. It is a marvellous article and includes the following comment on Hitler:

"He rose to power in the Weimar Republic, which used a very respectable system of PR. I do not suggest that any other system would have prevented his rise. I do assert that PR did not prevent it—yet moderation and stability is the large, and wild, claim made for this system by our own centre parties."

On the subject of the beneficiaries of PR, he said:

"PR is not a matter of morality, but crude party advantage—which is why the Liberals only adopted the idea in 1922, when their decline really began."

For once, we can all—well, perhaps not all—agree with the Home Secretary.

To be fair, it is not only the Liberal Democrats who stand to benefit. On the basis of the 1998 London borough election results, it is estimated that the system proposed by the prospective candidate for mayor, the Minister for London and Construction, would give the Labour party 11 seats, the Conservatives nine seats and the Liberal Democrats five seats, although they would have won no constituency seats. That underlines the crucial importance of the Lib-Lab pact in local government.

We do not believe that the Government have made their case for their approach to the elected assembly for London. The structure is different from the model used in Scotland and Wales. It will remove powers from the boroughs and create a body that is remote from the public it serves. Above all, by using the closed-list system, the Government will transfer power from the public to the party organisation. We oppose that, and we believe that many Labour Members oppose it. It is one of the reasons why we will vote for our reasoned amendment tonight.

5.39 pm

Mr. Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Canning Town): I am conscious of the limited time available for Back Benchers to contribute to the debate, and I will try to keep my remarks as brief as possible. I wish to raise several issues, including three on which I would like the Minister to comment when he responds to the debate. The first is on the London development partnership and the business case for London; the second is on the Metropolitan police service; and the third is on the London fire brigade.

The London development partnership is the shadow organisation for the development agency. There is a solid business case for additional river crossings in east London. Given that a decision on any such crossings will be delayed until the mayor and the assembly are in place, will my hon. Friend the Minister for London and Construction say whether the LDP will undertake the appropriate background, assessment and research work necessary before a decision is taken? If so, it will mean that the time between now and May 2000 is not wasted. In recent years, there have been extensive consultations about river crossings, and the package put together by the Government office for London over the past couple of years seemed to receive overwhelming support.

In addition, does my hon. Friend believe that the LDP in its present form is adequately resourced to undertake that background research in the period before the mayor and the assembly are in place? The chief executive, Eric Sorenson, is highly respected and leads a prestigious board. Its members would be more than able to get on with the job, but I should be interested to hear from the Minister whether they would require additional resources.

I turn now to the Metropolitan police service. Does the formula for funding that service take adequate account of the non-metropolitan or non-London tasks that the service performs, such as guarding embassies and providing diplomatic protection? Is the funding formula due for review? Will my hon. Friend say whether it is possible that the mayor might believe that additional resources would be appropriate in due course?

I am a member of the police parliamentary scheme, and over the past seven or eight months I have heard consistent resentment from police officers about the way in which the press have portrayed the statement from Sir Paul Condon, the Commissioner of Police of the Metropolis, to the Home Affairs Select Committee. Asked to estimate the number of corrupt officers in the Metropolitan police, the commissioner said that there were certainly fewer than 1 per cent. The tabloid press did some arithmetical calculations and said that that meant that there were about 300 corrupt police officers in the Metropolitan police.

No doubt there is some corruption in the force: no police service can avoid that. However, I agree with other hon. Members that the vast majority of officers in the Metropolitan police are committed and dedicated professionals. They go about their duties selflessly, sometimes sacrificing their lives to protect the capital and its residents. No police service is without flaws, and the inquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence has raised some serious questions. However, as my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary said, the Commissioner and his senior officers are committed to tackling the problem.

I join my right hon. Friend in welcoming the Commissioner's plans to move to borough-wide policing from next year. I commiserate with those chief superintendents who failed to win appointment as police supremos for their boroughs, and congratulate those who were successful, especially Chief Superintendents McPherson and Boylan, who in due course will be the officers in charge of Tower Hamlets and Newham respectively. Both officers are very professional, and will give great leadership to the police service in east London, which area will be better protected as a result.

My concern about the funding of the Metropolitan police is genuine and shared by many, and in the same way the funding of the fire service is causing consternation across London. This year's possible reduction in the number of appliances is the result of a national problem and has to do with the structure of the fire service pension fund. I know that the Home Office is studying the matter to work out a solution for firefighters' pensions in the medium and long term, but the immediate pressure on fire service budgets exerted by the requirement to pay pensions will not go away.

Contrary to what the hon. Member for Billericay (Mrs. Gorman) has said, pressure on the fire service pension budget is so extreme simply because of life expectancy. For 30 years, firefighters expected to die soon

after retirement. As a result of the shorter working week—now 42 hours—health and safety legislation and, most critically, the arrival of breathing apparatus, they now have a normal life expectancy. Whether they have retired after 30 or 55 years, or on a medical pension because of ill health, retired firefighters in the capital outnumber the firefighters who are employed and contributing to the pension scheme. That pressure on the fire service budget will intensify in the years to come.

Recently, the hon. Member for Billericay wrote to Graham Noakes, chairman of the Essex fire brigade committee, saying:

"All Britain's fire services are far too overstaffed. It is one of the last dinosaur industries clinging to feather bedding, using shroud waving and blackmail to prevent the modernisation of the service.

The Algarve is stuffed with healthy young British males, living comfortably, their incomes supplemented by disablement pensions from the fire service."

That is a not uncharacteristically inflammatory comment—if hon. Members will excuse the pun—from the hon. Lady. I have a brother who lives in the Algarve and, were it "stuffed" with medically retired firefighters, I am sure that he might have mentioned it to me in the past 15 years.

As I have explained, the pensions bill is so great because firefighters are living longer, although that is not to say that there is not some abuse and that some people do not receive pensions fraudulently. However, the checks and balances in pension legislation are such that the chances of doing so are remote.

In conclusion, as we heard last night and again today, Londoners overwhelmingly welcome the arrival, and the return, of strategic government for London. Most right hon. and hon. Members recognise that east London will be the engine room for this world-class capital, taking it into the next millennium with the channel tunnel rail link, Canary wharf, the Jubilee line extension, the dome, the City airport and developments in Tower Hamlets, Newham, Barking and Havering. East London will be the engine that will ensure that the capital makes progress. The return of strategic government for London will only assist that progress, and Labour Members overwhelmingly welcome the Bill that the Government have produced.

5.47 pm

Mr. Peter Brooke (Cities of London and Westminster): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick), which is one of the Tower Hamlets seats. One of my Liberal ancestors, my great-uncle, was the Liberal Member for a Tower Hamlets seat before the Liberals entered the decline to which my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) referred—before proportional representation. I therefore feel a sense of vicarious association with the hon. Member, and will seek to match him for brevity.

As we enjoy the second day of debate on what the hon. Member for Ilford, North (Ms Perham) accurately described yesterday as the greatest city in the world, I am conscious that the powers that be which look after us in this Chamber have given the debate a law and order slant. I hope that the House will forgive me if I defer my remarks on that subject until a later stage of the Bill.

The Home Secretary is unconsciously in my debt and, being absent, will continue to be unconscious, for had I risen to speak at 11.50 pm last night, when the Minister for Transport in London sat down, I would still have been speaking at midnight, and hence would have continued to speak today, perhaps even until 7 pm; so the right hon. Gentleman would have been delayed.

The police changes have long been foreshadowed, which certainly increases their acceptability. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield on his admirable dissection of the proposals in the Bill. It was one of the paradoxes of yesterday that almost every Labour Member ritually mourned the passing of the Greater London council in 1986, but went on to imply that they mourned the fact of its death, not the substance or condition of the GLC when it died, and thus would not want to restore it to life. It occurs to a bystander that my noble friend Baroness Thatcher may have done the Labour party a favour not merely by giving it a grudge that it could nurse for a dozen years, but by wiping the slate clean so that it could start again with London government.

I mentioned almost every speech made by a Labour Member, but one exception was that of the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone), in whose welfare I take a keen personal interest. Were he to be taken from us to be mayor, the Northern Ireland Select Committee would lose a valuable and relevant colleague. Perhaps not unexpectedly, he found plenty of good things to say about the GLC. As one element in the GLC's disappearance was the local government challenge to central Government that he set up, I was less surprised than some by the rich list of examples in the Bill in which the Secretary of State is given powers to override the mayor, even if that turns devolution into a Lewis Carroll concept.

However, in Brent, East, whatever other Labour Members think, the leopard has clearly not lost his spots, and tax raising, health authority and higher education powers in the Bill were all required or requested by the hon. Member for Brent, East. He also wanted the mayor to take over the appeal role from the Secretary of State on borough planning decisions. Far from the replication of the GLC, the hon. Gentleman seeks its massive expansion.

This is not the moment to stir the dying embers of old controversies, but beyond the pride in the Inner London education authority expressed by the hon. Member for Brent, East, I think that London students today would thank him more if polytechnics had been allowed to borrow to create student hostels in the capital, and had not been prevented from doing so because rents could not be a penny higher than the existing rents. Any parent who has had to fund students in private accommodation would have settled for the half loaf of a new ILEA hostel, even if the rents had been marginally higher. Moreover, I doubt that the London Institute would have been able to recreate itself so smoothly, on a much more compact campus, in the way that King's college has done during the past decade, if ILEA rules and regulations had still applied. There are dividends that can come from freedom.

At the higher and more elevated level of constitutional reform, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield implied, the Bill sadly joins the queue of piecemeal and inconsistent ventures that the Government have promoted. I read somewhere that the Prime Minister is not interested in the detail, but for that the rest of us will have to pay.

There was an illuminating exchange yesterday, during the excellent speech of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley)—whom I,

[Mr. Peter Brooke]

perhaps uniquely, can see in the Chamber—between my hon. Friend and the hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), who leads for the Liberal Democrats on the Bill. They spoke about legislating for London first, before issues such as English regional government, let alone a parliament for England, have been sorted out.

Mutatis mutandis: as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield said, it is the House of Lords all over again. If the Government go further with such legislation for England, what happens now in London will be a rock in the road around which we shall have to navigate. Labour Members take pleasure in the concept of joined-up government, but on the constitution they are more into painting by numbers.

Just as the events on Clapham common caught the Government by surprise, despite the fact that the Clapham omnibus passes the common as a matter of course, and caused them practical embarrassment in the run-up to the Welsh Assembly, so a tremendous punt, in these arrangements, is being taken on the quality of the first mayor. Those whom the Government would like to undertake the role are proving remarkably reluctant. It reminds me of the election for the mayor of New York, when John Lindsay stood as the liberal candidate and Bill Buckley stood as a Republican in protest. When, on the eve of poll, Buckley was asked what his first reaction would be if he were elected, he said that he would immediately ask for a recount.

The hon. Member for Lewisham, Deptford (Ms Ruddock) said yesterday that the mayor of London would clearly be a very special woman or man. However, given the powers that she or he will be given by the Bill, I have to ask, what if, by accident, she or he is not? It might be left to my party to solve the Government's dilemma by winning the election.

The Standing Committee on the Bill will get down to discussion of the list system. Yesterday, it was a joy to hear the Liberal Democrats eulogise lists: closed lists, open lists, laundry lists, civil lists, uncivil lists, Beachcomber's list of the Huntingdonshire cabmen. All those lists have their merits and Liberal Democrats can find arguments for any of them, but patently, any list will do. Incidentally, I have not investigated what happens if someone on the list, who is elected, wishes to cross the floor. I assume that he or she has to surrender his or her seat. It sounds like a Whips' paradise.

The functions of the Greater London assembly will also be discussed in Committee. I acknowledge that transport is genuinely a strategic issue, although, as the Government go on and on about integrated transport, I cannot help recalling the old Department of Transport joke that an integrated transport strategy is any transport policy other than the one that the Government have been pursuing up to that moment. However, I have noticed that the Bill would make the Greater London authority both the traffic and the highway authority for the new strategic London road network, and that Transport for London might well become the traffic authority for all roads with signals, which would massively remove traffic control from the boroughs. All that sounds much more executive than a strategic authority was expected to be.

I genuinely salute the proposals for a London air quality strategy. Acid rain does not stop at national boundaries, nor does pollution stop at borough ones. However, on waste, when the Minister winds up I shall be interested to hear how cost control, practicability and environmental benefit will be required, given the mayor's unfettered powers over recycling. At first blush, the Bill seems like an opportunity for environmental postures without responsibility for the practical consequences.

I am also curious about what the culture, media and sports strategy will make of broadcasting. Overall, that strategic initiative seems to be a makeweight thrown into the Bill to enlarge its strategic compass.

While on the subject of curiosity, I did not detect in the winding-up remarks of the Minister for Transport in London yesterday an answer to the question of my right hon. Friend the Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) about why the calculations made at the London School of Economics of the costs that would fall on Londoners from the Bill were much higher than those made by the Government, and why the Government believed that my constituents at the LSE were wrong.

Finally, as we are on short commons today, I want to raise in brief outline some issues on the planning powers in the Bill, which are less naturally strategic than the transport issues. I shall not argue a detailed case, because a whole speech could be devoted to them, but I want to illustrate the problem statistically. The Government office for London's consultation document on planning applications of strategic importance was published in August. Four categories of development were outlined and criteria recommended for identification as strategic. Fulfilling any of those criteria triggers the consultation of the mayor.

The Government office for London states that, by the criterion of floor space, between 100 and 300 planning applications per year would be considered strategic—that is 0.5 per cent. of all the planning applications in the capital. That percentage sounds a little precise against the numerical bracket of 100 to 300 for strategic applications, but that is less important than the fact that those applications tend to be concentrated in central London, which would elevate the percentage arithmetically. Of the 100 to 300 applications, 59 were awarded planning permission in the City of London in 1997; of those, more than a quarter exceeded the Government office for London floor space criterion, and four of them were more than twice the criterion; but on analysis, none of the 59 schemes raised any strategic issues by virtue of their size alone.

Similarly, on height, where the criterion threshold is 50 m, the London planning advisory committee's draft advice on high buildings and strategic views in London recognised that the established scale of development in the City meant that additional buildings exceeding 50 m would not always raise issues of strategic importance. The City of London already contains more than 50 buildings that are more than 50 m above ground level, 17 exceeding 80 m and eight that are more than 100 m tall. The International Financial Centre, otherwise known as the NatWest tower, stands 185 m above ground level. The height threshold in the City appears to be worthy of further consideration.

The City's competitiveness depends on decision making not being unduly bogged down. The City corporation organised a consultation meeting with the business community to consider the Government office for London's proposals. The overwhelming view of the meeting was that the proposals were unsatisfactory.

Much was made in yesterday's debate of the unanimity of opinion throughout London about the attractiveness of what the Bill envisages, including for the business community. Such unanimity always makes me apprehensive that the world is missing something. Therefore, I am, by instinct, reassured from the City business community's reactions that all is not wholly well.

6 pm

Ms Joan Ryan (Enfield, North): As the Member of Parliament representing London's most northerly constituency, I obviously have an interest in the Greater London Authority Bill. However, I am conscious that the legislation is not just about London and Londoners. Perhaps that is because I was not born and brought up in London. I am in London through no accident of birth: I choose to live here. I chose to come to London 18 years ago and I have stayed. I think it is a magnificent city.

However, I am conscious that London is a capital city, and therefore belongs to all the citizens of the United Kingdom. We have a responsibility to them: they want to visit a clean, well run city of which they can feel proud. Tourism is very important to London and its economy. In turn, the London economy has an important effect on the whole United Kingdom economy. So we must also view our responsibility for London in terms of its role as a capital city and its significance to the whole country.

My constituents, like many others in London constituencies, have suffered from the lack of co-ordination of key London services and functions, and will benefit greatly from the reforms that the Bill proposes. I congratulate the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions and his colleagues on many aspects of the Bill. I shall concentrate briefly on three major areas of responsibility for the Greater London assembly and its directly elected mayor: economic development, the environment and the policing of London.

I think it important to consider the reality of London's economy. It is one of the dominant capital cities of the world and, historically, has depended on its ability to trade and create wealth. As we have heard, however, 13 of Britain's most deprived local authorities are located in London. We have extremes in London. Unemployment in the capital is greater than the totals for Scotland and Wales combined. London businesses are crying out for skilled workers who cannot be found. Effective measures to address those problems should have been taken over the past decade, and probably before then, too. Those issues should have been dealt with years ago, but we had to wait until 1 May 1997 to see any solutions advanced.

Enfield, North is perhaps a good example—if "good" is the right word—of how London has suffered from the lack of any co-ordinated strategy. The responses to the consultation exercise illustrate what most Londoners, and certainly most London businesses, already know: there is a desperate need for a body with a strategic role in economic development, regeneration and tourism.

In a sense, London has become many cities. Each borough competes with its neighbours to provide often isolated facilities in order to attract enterprise and employment, or works with its immediate neighbours while competing with other bits of London. I do not single out those boroughs and their efforts for criticism—what else can they do? They cannot ignore the needs of their populations. However, I point a finger at the Conservative party for its negligence in government.

In yesterday's debate, we heard nothing but carping from Conservative Members as the Government strive to overcome their legacy and their neglect. Each borough needs—and plainly requests—a strategic body to maximise the benefits of investment in London, its facilities, opportunities and its work force. The Greater London authority will deliver that body. The mayor will draw up London's economic development strategy with the London development agency, which will be responsible for implementing that strategy. That is a clear and straightforward process, which will free London's businesses and allow them to devote their energies to ensuring that their businesses succeed. It will help to attract sustainable long-term investment projects, which I believe are frequently deterred by the frustrations of the current system.

In my constituency—an area that once thrived, with household-name manufacturing industries—there are earnest efforts to create new business opportunities. They are necessary because of the collapse of the industries that made Enfield the place it is today. However, those efforts are undermined because Enfield is competing for investment not only with other European cities, the far east or America but with other London boroughs. Enfield is part of London, and Enfield and London will benefit from the focus and coherence that the Greater London authority and the mayor will bring to London's economic development.

While economic development is certainly a major concern, there is more to London than that. The Bill recognises that fact and sets out wide-ranging proposals to improve quality of life in the capital. London's environment must be considered positively. My constituency, which borders the northern fringes of the capital, is home to sights of great beauty and interest. It was good enough to serve as a retreat for royal persons in centuries past, and now provides a haven of recreation for the people of Enfield and from across north London. The protection and promotion of London's natural habitats, assessment of the state of London's environment, the management and recycling of waste generated in greater London and air quality management strategies will bring to London the benefits of improved health and a better quality of life. Our nation's capital deserves those improvements.

The policing of London is an issue raised constantly by constituents, and is a major concern. Through the Bill, our Metropolitan police force will become more accountable and much more in touch with the population that it serves. I understand that tourism in the capital creates unique problems, but the basis of an efficient and respected police service is a relationship of trust between the police and the communities in which they operate. I believe that the Bill will strengthen that relationship.

I was surprised to hear the comments of the right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler): one would think that the Bill was an attack upon the Metropolitan police. They do not view it as such. It is not an attack, but a step forward in the relationship between London's police force and the people of London. That can only be a good thing. Such a move is long overdue and much needed, and I think it will be very welcome.

It is remarkable to hear Opposition Members—particularly Conservative Members for London constituencies—attacking the Bill's proposals. Londoners have told them at every opportunity, "This is what we

[Ms Joan Ryan]

want." They voted for it in the Government's manifesto at the general election and in the London referendum—an overwhelming result, with more than 70 per cent. of Londoners voting for the Bill.

I am delighted that my Government have listened to Londoners, and have set about delivering for them with vigour, enthusiasm and commitment. Whatever the Conservatives might think, the Bill has achieved something very important: it has united Londoners in a positive proposal for the city's future. It is important to note that the interest that we have witnessed in the mayor for London and the GLA will help to reconnect Londoners to the democratic process and perhaps assist in reversing the worrying trend of low turnouts in local elections.

I welcome the Bill and look forward to seeing it become a reality that will improve life for all Londoners; it will certainly have a very beneficial impact beyond the boundaries of London.

6.9 pm

Mr. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): I thank the Home Secretary, who is no longer in his place, for giving me such an interesting history lesson about the Metropolitan police.

I shall concentrate on two aspects of the Bill—policing and transport. I welcome the establishment of the Metropolitan police authority and the fact that a majority of its members will be assembly members. I hope that the authority's democratic oversight of, and input to, the Metropolitan police will reduce the occurrence of serious miscarriages of justice such as the case of my constituent, former Police Constable Gordon Warren, who was thrown out of the Met on bogus medical grounds and offered a paltry sum to compensate him for his pain and suffering. He received no protection from senior Met officers.

Although I welcome the establishment of the authority, I regret the absence of tax-varying powers for Londoners, which means that they will not be able to decide whether they want more or fewer police officers patrolling the streets. London streets have a small police presence compared to cities in other European countries.

I am reluctant to bore the House with statistics, but I am sure that hon. Members will find figures for London more relevant than the rather misleading national figures quoted by the Minister for Transport in London in last night's debate. The need for further funding is more apparent than ever. Despite an increase in the special grant to the Met, the overall increase in its allocation for 1999-2000 was only 1.7 per cent., which is below inflation and below the national average increase of 2.7 per cent.

The position is even worse if one considers the 4 per cent. pay rise for the Met, because staff costs account for 80 per cent. of expenditure. The police estimate that an increase of 6 per cent. per annum is required if they are to stand still in real terms. All that is taking place in the context of a drop of 1,500 in the number of police officers since 1992. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) did not refer to that fact in his contribution, in which he gave figures from 1979.

Although Liberal Democrat Members welcome the birth of the Metropolitan police authority, we believe that the mayor should be given the power to raise more funds, if that is what Londoners want, to improve London's policing.

All hon. Members would, I am sure, agree that Londoners will judge the success of the mayor, the Greater London authority and the new citywide government on their ability to deliver a radically improved transport system. That has been severely hampered in a number of respects. In yesterday's debate, much was said about the proportion that the Secretary of State and the Consolidated Fund will take from the proceeds of congestion charging or parking levies.

I shall not dwell on schedules 13 and 14, because I am sure that, by now, most hon. Members know them by heart, but it is worth quoting from "Breaking the Logjam". Page 13 of the document refers to powers

"to require a proportion of the revenue to be paid to central government",

and page 16 says that local authorities that introduce charging schemes

"should be able to retain 100 per cent. of the net revenue generated for at least 10 years".

We have been told that London will have a citywide government, so perhaps it is outside the scope of a measure that applies to local authorities.

The Minister for Transport in London (Ms Glenda Jackson): Let me set the hon. Gentleman's mind at rest. As I said in yesterday's debate, the mayor and the assembly will be required to spend every penny raised on the mayor's integrated transport strategy.

Mr. Brake: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She has made that point several times. It is a pity that so much confusion has arisen between documents issued by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Bill. Why are the Government committed to using 100 per cent. of that revenue for the transport strategy for only 10 years, and not longer? They could clear up the confusion by amending schedules 13 and 14. The project of the mayor and the GLA will not survive if, as I said yesterday, revenue from congestion charging that is raised in London boroughs—for example, in Chelsea or Cheam—is spent elsewhere in the country.

The Government must also reassure Londoners on the question of the public-private partnership. Yesterday, some hon. Members had difficulty describing PPP. The Minister must answer key questions. First, a figure of £7 billion is being quoted ad nauseam, but what is the cost of the PPP over the duration of the contracts? It is not £7 billion. Will the Minister confirm that, over the 20 or 30 years of the contracts, the cost may be about £500 million per annum, so Londoners will have to pay back much more than £7 billion?

What percentage of that amount will be paid by Londoners? That question was asked yesterday, but it needs to be considered again. Liberal Democrat Members are still uncertain about the funds that the new transport authority for London will receive from the Government towards its investment costs in years to come and what it will be expected to pay for from the revenue on congestion charging and parking levies. I hope that the Minister will answer that today or in writing at a later date. We need to know whether the Government, as the AA has said, are simply substituting new money for old.

What powers will the mayor have to amend the contracts? We accept that the final details of the PPP contracts need to be agreed, but will the Minister consider

having a review two years after they have been signed, so that the mayor and the GLA can negotiate, on the fringes or perhaps more radically, with the infrastructure provider about what the company will provide? They could then have some influence over the running of the tube.

Londoners are expecting the mayor and the GLA to get rid of cattle truck conditions on the tube. If simple answers can be given to those simple questions, that will go a long way to reassuring Londoners that the PPP is on track, that they will not have to pay through the nose for it, and that the GLA will be able to fine-tune or enhance the deal in years to come.

Ms Jackson: As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made abundantly clear yesterday, the public-private partnership will be completed by the Government. It entails a process of competitive bidding by those who want to win the contracts. My right hon. Friend also said that, if completion of the PPP was later than the introduction of the mayor and the assembly, the mayor would be consulted. The contracts will be long-term, and will clearly have to contain checks and balances to ensure that they are being delivered at the price agreed. As my right hon. Friend made clear, decisions will be based on best value. I hope that that clarifies the position for the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Brake: I thank the hon. Lady for her answer. I welcome the fact that the mayor will be consulted, but we are asking for more than consultation; we are asking for a clause to be written into the contracts to allow the mayor and the GLA an opportunity to review them in a couple of years once the PPP has bedded down. The Minister will say that the contracts have been drawn up, but I am well aware, from my previous employment, that flexibility can be built into contracts to provide more or less service. That could be negotiated in the current deal.

Ms Jackson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for allowing me to intervene on him a third time. In essence, he was saying that the contract would agree to intervention. As we have already made clear, the Government are committed to completing the PPP process. A contract that contains within it the possibility of the various issues that he mentioned being reconsidered will be a completed contract. Surely he is not suggesting that someone would enter into a binding contract with the proviso that, perhaps two years down the line, all involved could ignore the signatures on the paper. That would be a curious way of conducting business.

Mr. Brake: I do not feel that we should debate this any further, but that was not the point that I was making. I think that the Minister understands perfectly that we are saying that, two years into a contract, there should be a review point at which the contractors, the mayor and the GLA would negotiate some flexibility, perhaps enhancing certain services and reducing others. I assure the Minister that it can be done if the will is there to do it.

Londoners expect road traffic reduction to be tackled. The Government have already missed the opportunity to deal with road traffic reduction at a national level, so let us not miss the opportunity in London. A slowdown in the increase in the number of cars in London is not an option. Surely London, of all the areas in the country, is the one where the Government, the mayor and the GLA should be committed to reducing traffic. I see no reason why that could not be written into the mayor's transport strategy at this point, so that there is a firm commitment to deliver significant road traffic reduction in London.

On a related matter, scope should be given to Transport for London to anticipate congestion charges and parking levies in order to raise revenue now. That will ensure that the carrots are provided now—the sticks can come in future, once a viable alternative is in place.

We need greater integration of the rail services. The Bill is not as tough as it could be. Yes, the mayor is able to give advice to the franchising director, but the franchising director is not required to take it.

I fail to understand why all boards except one will have assembly members or borough representatives on them. The board of Transport for London will be the sole board on which no assembly member or borough councillor will be present. I should like the Minister to explain the logic behind that. I understand the need to have experts on boards, but why not have one elected representative who can put the views of London commuters? I look forward to the Minister's explanation.

The introduction of the new Metropolitan police authority is to be welcomed. It will help to restore confidence in the Metropolitan police and give the whole community a stake in its police. That is vital, given that confidence in the Met is low following the Stephen Lawrence inquiry.

If London is to maintain and strengthen its position as the world's premier city, the GLA must be given the wherewithal to integrate all modes of transport, including rail. The mayor must be given the power to enhance not only buses but tube and train services, funded by congestion charges and parking levies. Londoners must know that their money will be spent on London transport, the whole of London transport and nothing but London transport, in its entirety and for eternity. I am sure that we shall return to those issues in Committee.

6.24 pm

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden): Like many hon. Members who have spoken in favour of the Bill, my views have been formed by experience in London local government. Having been a London councillor for 16 years, during the time of the Greater London council and after its demise, I am glad that the Bill does not mark a return to the GLC, but establishes a genuinely new strategic body that will focus on certain core responsibilities.

The GLC performed some things well, but its remit was too vast and the things that it tried to do too numerous for the services that it provided to be of consistently high or responsive quality. The Greater London authority, by virtue of being much more narrowly defined and having its role very carefully specified, stands a much better chance of beginning to tackle some of the endemic problems that have beset London for too long.

It has long been my belief that the main division in London today is not between north and south of the river, as was traditionally the case—although, having been born and bred in south London, I recognise that divide—but between inner and outer-London. As my constituency is at the very southern tip of the Northern line, I qualify as an outer-London Member of Parliament. The problems of

[Siobhain McDonagh]

outer London boroughs such as my own are, of course, very different in many respects from those of inner London.

In terms of housing and education, for example, many inner London boroughs have vast social problems that we in outer London, thankfully do not face. That is why it is good that the government have left responsibility for those issues firmly where they belong—with local councils, which are best placed to devise local solutions to their own problems.

Although much divides inner and outer London, we have some extremely important common problems, and they will require effective policies from the mayor and the assembly. The Bill identifies transport, planning, development and the police as major areas for the mayor and the assembly. Many hon. Members have made their comments on specific matters contained in the Bill. I shall add a few words, not so much on the substance of the GLA's responsibilities as on the manner in which they are to be carried out.

I hope that the GLA will become a model for a new type of strategic authority, one which genuinely listens and responds to those who will be directly affected by its decisions. Ironically, by the way in which she abolished it, Baroness Thatcher succeeded in making the GLC wildly popular. During that time, the people of London felt genuinely close to an organisation from which they had felt distanced for years.

It is crucial that the GLA establishes a similar rapport with Londoners. It can do that only if it seeks out relevant views and opinions and by genuinely listening to people with experience of the issues within its remit. That is why I am slightly concerned to note the responses to the Bill from the London Voluntary Service Council and the London Chamber of Commerce. Both organisations warmly welcome the establishment of the authority, but question its commitment to meaningful consultation.

Both the voluntary sector and the business community contain an enormous wealth of experience and expertise that must be listened to by any strategic authority concerned with planning, development and transport. Just as the Government are calling on authorities throughout the country to change the culture of local government and to commit themselves to modernisation and openness, the GLA must lead the way in demonstrating a willingness to engage in meaningful consultation. I am sure that a commitment to full, open and regular consultation with business, borough councils and the voluntary sector is implicit in the Bill, but it does no harm to emphasise it and to assure those important partners that their views will be heard.

There is no shortage of Londoners with a view on the future of our city—ask any cab driver. There exists an anonymous web of quangos, panels, bodies, councils and boards of all kinds, all of which are churning out reports and recommendations on a vast range of subjects directly relevant to the work of the GLA. There can be no doubt that the absence of a strategic government for the capital has meant that so much of this work remains fragmented and ineffective. The GLA must pull this together and harness the energy in building a better future for London.

The referendum last year showed that Londoners want the new mayor and the assembly and will welcome the Bill. If the mayor and the assembly demonstrate a willingness to hear the views of Londoners and to take those views seriously, they can build on this good will to benefit all of London.

6.29 pm

Mr. Richard Ottaway (Croydon, South): Time does not permit me to dwell on the speeches that have been made, other than to pour praise on my right hon. Friend the Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), who showed that he can always enhance any debate, and to say to the hon. Member for Enfield, North (Ms Ryan), as someone who represents the most southerly constituency in London, that she should bear in mind the fact that London's economic recovery started after we abolished the GLC.

Our fundamental concern about the Bill is that clash and conflict between the new authority and the boroughs will be inevitable. It is for that reason that we urged the Government to have two questions in last May's referendum. If we had been successful, as many thought we should be, we would have said yes to the mayor, but no to the Government's current proposals for the assembly.

We believe that an assembly made up of representatives from the 32 London boroughs and the corporation of London would avoid conflict within the authority and build a bridge between the man in the street and the mayor. That is the basis of our reasoned amendment.

It has been argued that that proposal is flawed. The case against it put forward yesterday by hon. Members was that, perish the thought, borough representatives would stand up for their boroughs; but that is the essence of democracy. We put our constituency point of view and the mayor is going to stand up for London, so what is wrong with an assembly comprised of borough representatives standing up for their boroughs?

Indeed, the weakness of the proposed closed-list proportional representation structure is that the mayor will be detached from what the man in the street is thinking. Borough representatives would tell him. That is better than focus groups, consultants and unelected officials. We in the Conservative party believe in the borough link. We believe that it is the cornerstone of democracy and have no hesitation in fighting for it tonight.

The House should be in no doubt about the threat that the Bill poses to the boroughs of London. Clash and conflict are inevitable. The impact of the Greater London authority is just dawning on London authorities. The latest edition of the *Local Government Chronicle* quotes the chief executive of Kensington and Chelsea:

"I think the immediate things that make everybody's hair begin to rise are the road network, transportation and planning, where the potential for conflict is substantial."

Lest anyone thinks that that quote is politically biased, I quote the chief executive of Islington:

"It's now about to dawn on everyone that the GLA is going to have a massive impact on the way the boroughs operate."

The Minister for London and Construction yesterday waved a letter, as he did this afternoon, from someone calling himself the chair of the Association of London Government.

Mr. Raynsford: He is a council leader himself.

Mr. Ottaway: The Minister makes my very point. That spontaneous letter turned up, just by coincidence, on the day of Second Reading. I am sure that the Minister will let us know in his winding-up speech whether he requested that letter, but, having made inquiries into the its origin, I find that that opinion was reached without any consultation within the ALG and, as was effectively drawn out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler), the shadow Home Secretary, it flies in the face of the real opinion of ALG leaders.

Mr. Raynsford: That was 12 months ago.

Mr. Ottaway: I know that the Labour party is good at shifting its views, but to have a complete U-turn on its policy within 12 months takes the biscuit.

If ever there was a Jekyll and Hyde piece of legislation, this is it. It sets up a new authority with a powerful mayor, with his own mandate. However, it contains as many measures giving powers to the Secretary of State as references to the mayor. We have only to look at clause 18 to get a feel for the legislation. It refers to the Secretary of State eight times, to the Treasury twice and to the mayor not at all.

The briefest examination of clauses 70 and 71 reveals that the Secretary of State can either increase, decrease or change the budget in any way he wants. As for clause 73, where the council tax is calculated by the formula R minus P1 minus A divided by T, all I can say is that any Bill with a formula in it is on the road to ruin.

Mr. Keith Hill (Streatham): Why?

Mr. Ottaway: The hon. Gentleman will soon find out.

The true picture is emerging. The Prime Minister wanted a presidential-style mayor with glamour, and the Deputy Prime Minister then spent 18 months constructing a straitjacket for him. It is almost as if they knew that their efforts to prevent the hon. Member for Brent, East (Mr. Livingstone) from becoming mayor were doomed. It is legislation designed to keep him in check in the event of his success. We hereby name those the Livingstone clauses.

Mr. Simon Hughes: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Ottaway: I am sorry. Time does not permit me. I will give way in a minute if I get ahead of the clock.

What is becoming clear is that, such are the Secretary of State's powers that, whoever is nominally elected as the first mayor of London, the real first mayor of London will be the right hon. Member for Hull, East (Mr. Prescott). He will make the decisions; he has the power. If that is freedom for London, it is freedom in a straitjacket. The Government are saying, "Do anything you like as long as it is what we tell you to do." If anything epitomises the Blair Government and their control-freak tendencies, it is the Bill.

If anything illustrates the Government's muddled thinking, it is their proposals for congestion charging. Eighty per cent. of commuters into London already travel by public transport, but the Deputy Prime Minister wants to hit the other 20 per cent. His excuse for clobbering the private commuter is that the roads are congested; that is his story and he is sticking it.—[HON. MEMBERS: "Sticking it?"]—sticking to it—but what is causing the congestion? Is it the volume of traffic or could it be the actions of the Traffic Director for London, who published his revisions to the network plan some two months ago? In it, he said:

"Red route success will now be judged against tough new targets set by the Secretary of State for Transport. Targets include providing at least 500 new signalled pedestrian crossings, traffic calming at 1,200 side road junctions, 200 cycle crossings".

That is fair enough—it is a clear statement of policy—but the point is that the congestion is being caused not by the motorist, but by the Government.

I have to hand it to the Deputy Prime Minister. He creates the congestion, taxes it and then uses it to replace the subsidy to London Underground, but is he going to apply the money to London Underground? I hope that the Minister will use his winding-up speech to clear up the muddled picture over London Underground's finances.

We know from the Chancellor of the Exchequer that the Government subsidy for London Underground ends in 2000, presumably at the end of the financial year in March. We also know from the Deputy Prime Minister's speech yesterday that his plans for public-private partnership may not be ready by then. That is fair enough, so, first, can the Minister confirm that he will seek further subsidy from the Government to cover the interim period until the plans are in place?

Secondly, we had until now assumed that the proceeds of congestion charging would be used to replace the subsidy. The Minister makes it clear that that is not the case, but, when questioned about the on-going costs of the public-private partnership, the Deputy Prime Minister said that that was a matter not for him, but for the mayor, so the picture is becoming clearer.

The Deputy Prime Minister is inviting investment in an inherently loss-making organisation. He talks of £7 billion investment from the private sector. He will then turn to the mayor and say, "You pay it back." That means two things. First, removing the subsidy from London Underground is, effectively, a tax by the back door on Londoners. Secondly, it is a £7 billion invoice sitting on the mayor's desk on the day that he starts work.

If there is one concern that rises above all others, it is the expectations that have been raised by Labour's legendary spin doctors: those men of the Millbank tendency, who sit in that rather fuddy-duddy tower along the Embankment, take any proposal and inject adjectives such as radical, modern, world-class, strong, integrated, improving, building, tackling, better—all words raising the temperature in judging the success or failure of a given policy.

It is the approach of those who have never had to stand up and face the electorate. They were at it yesterday when they stuck in the Deputy Prime Minister's speech the fact that the mayor would be able to eliminate poverty and social exclusion in London. The serious point is that the

[Mr. Ottaway]

inherent danger in letting those people loose through that most powerful of media, the British media, is that expectations are raised among the people of London and the country generally that things can be achieved when, in fact, they can never be achieved.

Never could there be a bigger clash or conflict between new Labour's ideas and the expectations raised for London than when there is a confrontation with the biggest gimmick of them all. Twice a year, the mayor and the assembly will attend a meeting which will be open to all members of the public and which will be known as a people's question time. That takes the biscuit. We have the people's Parliament, the people's Government and now the people's question time.

Who can attend? Who will be the lucky people to put a question to mayor Ken? It does not say in the Bill, and, as far as I can see, the 52 million people in the United Kingdom are allowed to attend, and probably 300 million people from the European Union as well. Perhaps that could explain the secret, hidden after-use for the Dome. Is that where Mayor Ken will hold his people's question time?

Mr. Simon Hughes: I have heard what the hon. Gentleman said about question time and that is a relatively small part of the Bill. However, does he not accept that it is far better for people elected by Londoners to be held to account by Londoners? At the moment, the people who represent and speak for London, including the Minister and the Minister for Transport in London, are appointed rather than elected, and are under no obligation to speak to a single Londoner.

Mr. Ottaway: I agree with the hon. Gentleman. I object to the gimmicky nature of the people's question time. Let us have a proper question time, but let us not have it in this new Labour gimmicky style that does nothing but try to appeal to the British media.

I was talking about people's question time being conducted by mayor Ken. I am for ever grateful to whoever is continuing to send me copies of the minutes of the meetings of the London Labour party. The latest report says:

> "'Control freakery' is not just a bad habit of over-zealous Party apparatchiks. It is an intrinsic part of the Blairite strategy for managing a democratic society in conditions of economic instability."

Do they know something that we do not know? It goes on:

> "Tony Blair has made clear his intention to exclude Ken Livingstone from Labour's one member one vote ballot for London Mayor. At . . . AGM Ken declared he would fight this battle 'to the wire'. His determination was warmly welcomed, as it will be among tens of thousands of Labour activists and millions of London's voters."

It does not stop there. It goes on:

> "The current crisis over the selection of candidates consequently raises the issue of keeping the Party Labour. The most hardline position is summarised by Fraser Kemp MP, quoted as saying about the vetting system: 'If we are to be consistent, it has to apply to Westminster MPs'. If the Millbank Tendency pursues this line it will lead to further clashes with the membership."

That is what it will be about. When London needs a clear and cohesive voice, a voice of quiet reason to pull together and harness the energy that is this great city, the Government blow it. They argue among themselves, then hype it to a level that raises people's expectations and on which they cannot deliver.

It will be a battle from the outset with every pressure group in London and beyond looking for instant salvation. Those people will be doing that because the Government have told them that the Bill will be the be-all and end-all of their problems. The Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister and the House know that that is not the case. The sooner the expectations are tempered, the better it will be for London and Londoners.

This is a complex piece of legislation and we will do our best to make positive suggestions for improvements, as would be expected from a constructive Opposition. Whoever wins the election and becomes the mayor, and whoever ends up in the assembly will have a tough time. The Bill makes their job harder, not easier, and I urge the House to reject it.

6.45 pm

The Minister for London and Construction (Mr. Nick Raynsford): Opening the debate yesterday, the right hon. Member for South-West Norfolk (Mrs. Shephard) referred to the Bill's proposals as an "experiment". She is wrong. The Bill puts an end to an experiment on which the Conservative party embarked in 1986. It was an experiment to see whether it was possible to run one of the world's great cities without any strategic direction, with no citywide representation, with no leadership, with no responsibility and with no accountability.

It was clear from the start that the experiment would not work. It was clear that one could not run a city the size of London through quangos, joint boards, ad hoc committees and obscure advisory panels. Any Londoner could have told the Conservative Government that. Londoners could see that, with no one in charge, there was no one able to take effective action to tackle strategic issues affecting the city. No one was able to take real steps to reduce poverty and social exclusion across the capital. There was no one to take responsibility for London's transport infrastructure and traffic congestion, which the hon. Member for Croydon, South (Mr. Ottaway) appears to believe only arrived in the capital 18 months ago with the election of this Government. That is an extraordinary proposition. There was no one taking on the problem of air pollution and congestion.

Of course, 12 years ago, nobody bothered to ask the people of London. What a contrast with the approach that has characterised the development of the proposals before the House tonight. The proposals formed a key part of our manifesto and have been subject to extensive consultation, arising from the Green Paper we published last July and then confirmed in the White Paper published in March. Those proposals were then put to the people of London and approved in a referendum in May. In that referendum, people in every borough across the capital voted yes to a mayor and assembly for London. Their verdict was clear; the great experiment of 1986 had failed. All it proved, in the end, was that where no one is in charge, nothing will get done.

All over London—except, perhaps, on part of the Opposition Benches—there is now an acceptance of the principles underlying our proposals: that London needs a

strategic level of governance; that it must deliver a proper balance of leadership and democratic accountability; and that it must work in close partnership with the rest of London—with business, the boroughs and London's voluntary sector—in fulfilling its role.

It shows just how far we have come. We have a Bill and we have general support for the principle from the public and, I believe, from most parts of the House. The hon. Member for Southwark, North and Bermondsey (Mr. Hughes), in between announcing his candidacy for the mayoralty, confirmed yesterday that the Liberal Democrats would support the Bill. We welcome that. However, The Official Opposition are all over the place. They tell us now that they support the idea of a mayor, conveniently forgetting to mention that they strenuously opposed the proposition until last year's general election. Obviously, we welcome the change of heart, as, no doubt, does Lord Archer. He has been assiduous in listening to the debates, and he must have been astonished that his own party referred frequently to mayoral candidates without once mentioning the possibility of him being elected. What an interesting indication of the Conservative party's lack of confidence in its leading candidate.

The Conservative party appears to be oblivious to the obvious truth that, if there is to be a mayor responsible for a city the size of London, that mayor must be accountable. There must be an elected assembly able to keep watch on the mayor's actions, to scrutinise and agree the mayor's budgets and to take up issues of concern to Londoners and matters of Londonwide importance.

Sir Paul Beresford: In reality, the assembly will be a toothless organisation—excuse the pun, given my other profession. The mayor will present what he wishes to the assembly and it will forward reports to him, which he can reject overnight. The assembly will be able to vary the budget only if it gets a two-thirds majority in a hung council, with the influence of the patronage of the mayor who is responsible for the jobs of about a third of the assembly members. That is not realistic.

Mr. Raynsford: The only toothless people I feel sorry for are the victims of the hon. Gentleman in his other walk of life. This is a carefully structured system to ensure accountability. The assembly will be able to override the mayor where it believes firmly that the mayor is wrong and it can command a two-thirds majority. It makes sense.

The idea of an assembly composed solely of current borough council leaders is, quite simply, inadequate. The borough leaders already have sufficient responsibilities in their own areas, and will rightly continue to pursue their own local interests rather than taking the wider perspective essential for a wider city assembly. Regardless, the boroughs themselves—whom the Tories claim to be supporting—have made it manifestly clear that they want nothing to do with the Tories' propositions.

The Opposition are proposing an arrangement that is patently unsatisfactory, and that does not command the support of the London boroughs or even of all their own Back Benchers—some of whom argued yesterday for an elected assembly. What a mess, and what a party! It is no wonder that the Leader of the Opposition has issued a Christmas card depicting a rather small flock of miserable-looking sheep being herded by a demented shepherd into oblivion. I can think of no more appropriate metaphor for the Opposition's stance on this legislation. The Government are adopting a very different approach.

Mr. Simon Hughes: I am not dissenting from the Minister's analysis; I have heard about the Christmas card. Will he confirm that, if the general view of the Committee and others is that the mayor's powers need to be reined in—particularly on the recall issue, which we debated yesterday—and that the assembly's powers have to be increased, the Government will favourably consider readjusting the powers of the two parts of the Greater London authority?

Mr. Raynsford: I confirm that we have constructed proposals that are designed to ensure a proper balance between the powers of the assembly and those of the mayor. We shall happily debate that balance, and whether any adjustment to it is necessary. However, we believe that we have created the right structure of a democratically elected mayor and a democratically elected assembly, who will be able to work together in the interests of London.

The mayor and assembly will be able to work also with the boroughs to pursue London's interests. That is what we want—a framework to serve the people of London. The framework will also involve radical new voting systems, giving the mayor a strong mandate and creating an inclusive assembly.

Sir Norman Fowler: As for that radical new voting system, why is the hon. Gentleman proposing the closed-party-list system?

Mr. Raynsford: As the right hon. Gentleman should know by now, we are proposing exactly the same system as applies in Scotland and Wales—where people will have a direct choice of their own constituency candidate, for whom they will personally be able to vote. There will be a top-up vote for parties to ensure that there is a proper, proportionate election which is representative of those parties. It is a fair system. It is the system that will apply in Scotland and Wales, and it will apply also in London. Only the right hon. Gentleman—who is obsessed with the issue—seems to see any disadvantage in it.

Londoners will have a new role in ensuring direct, face-to-face accountability by participating with the mayor in the people's question time—which the hon. Member for Croydon, South had the gall to condemn and to try to ridicule. I hope that the people of London will take note of the contempt for democracy and for the people of London that he demonstrated.

Many hon. Members from both sides have spoken and intervened in this debate. The right hon. Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir N. Fowler) not only made his rather curious foray into the issue of voting arrangements, but indicated the Conservative party's failure to reach a decision on the creation of the Metropolitan police authority. In his words, he had "suspended judgment"—I think that that means that he is sitting on the fence—on creation of the authority.

It is extraordinary that Conservative Members have taken so long to reach a view on the Metropolitan police authority. After all, it has been five years since the former Home Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr. Clarke), stated:

[Mr. Raynsford]

"I have also re-examined the role of the Home Secretary in relation to the Metropolitan police. I propose to establish for the first time a police authority for the Metropolitan police on the new national model separate from the Home Office and with essentially the same tasks as police authorities elsewhere."

—[*Official Report*, 23 March 1993; Vol. 221, c. 766.]

He was right. Why on earth has the Conservative party taken so long to catch up with him? Perhaps it is uncomfortable for Conservative Members to be associated with the right hon. and learned Gentleman because of his views on Europe.

Sir Norman Fowler: In helping us, will the hon. Gentleman tell us whether he believes that, at the end of three years, there will be more or fewer police in the Metropolitan police?

Mr. Raynsford: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, in the arrangements that we are making, the Home Secretary will retain a reserve power to ensure that there will be an adequate budget to maintain an adequate and satisfactory level of policing.

Sir Norman Fowler: How many?

Mr. Raynsford: I cannot tell the right hon. Gentleman that—no one in my position can do so—as I am not responsible for that budget. However, I can give him the very clear indication—as the Home Secretary gave it earlier in the debate—that the Home Secretary is determined to ensure that the Metropolitan police force has the resources necessary to discharge its functions. That is what we shall ensure.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town (Mr. Fitzpatrick) asked a number of questions, the first of which was on east London river crossings. The Government have said that decisions on new crossings must wait for the new mayor. However, the Government will safeguard the alignments and ensure that preparatory work continues so that the mayor will be able quickly to reach a view. Meanwhile, English Partnerships is performing development work on the crossings.

My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Canning Town asked questions also about the Metropolitan police budget for their work in national functions. I assure him that, for 1999-2000, the police were allocated a special payment in recognition of their special capital city, national and international functions. The payment will be made as part of the central Government funding formula and will not be affected by creation of the new Greater London authority.

The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke), with his usual humour, expressed some distaste for the constitutional reform that the Government have begun. I hope that, in the years ahead, he will look back and regale his grandchildren and others in his usual humorous way with stories of the role that he played in the establishment of Britain's new constitutional arrangements, which secured a far better and more democratic society than the one that he knew initially.

The right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster asked also about planning powers. His rather relaxed view of whether tall buildings or very large office blocks should be subject to the mayor's scrutiny is not entirely in keeping with the views of many people in London, including some of his own constituents—to whom I was speaking at a meeting of the Knightsbridge Association—who have expressed concern about the scale of development. It is right that we have to strike a balance in the matter—which we are attempting to do—between legitimate concern for environmental protection and arrangements to enable business not only to prosper, but to thrive. We have consulted on the matter, and are considering the conclusions to be drawn from the consultation. We shall soon make announcements on it.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, North (Ms Ryan), in a very effective speech, highlighted the importance of the economy and action by the new authority to improve London's economy. She stressed that the Bill was a step forward in the relationship between the Metropolitan police and the people of London.

The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Mr. Brake) gave a welcome to the Metropolitan police authority. He asked questions about police funding to which I have already responded. He asked a series of questions on transport, not all of which I shall be able to answer now because of the shortage of time. Nevertheless, I shall stress to him two points.

First, the Government are quite determined to ensure that there is in place a satisfactory public-private partnership to guarantee adequate funding for the underground for the years ahead. It is the Government's responsibility to make those arrangements. The mayor, when elected, will be consulted on them, but it would be crazy to amend a bidding process and contractual arrangements when we are halfway through them. That would simply not be practical politics.

Secondly—as the hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington asked about the composition of Transport for London—I stress that the body will be an executive that executes the strategy determined by the mayor, who will be the democratically accountable person.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Siobhain McDonagh)—in a commendably brief speech, which was not necessarily her choice, but due to time constraints—gave warm support to the restoration of citywide government.

We have lived through a period in which London has lacked [illegible]c government. We are bringing that period to an [illegible]. We are restoring a democratically elected citywide government to London—a new form of strategic citywide government—with the power to make a difference. We promised to put right the civic vandalism of 1986, and to restore democratic and accountable government to the capital. The Bill delivers on that promise. I warmly commend it to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 140, Noes 396.

Division No. 23] [7 pm

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Beresford, Sir Paul
Amess, David	Blunt, Crispin
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Body, Sir Richard
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Boswell, Tim
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Bottomley, Peter *(Worthing W)*
Beggs, Roy	Brady, Graham
Bercow, John	Brazier, Julian

Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Clappison, James
Clark, Rt Hon Alan *(Kensington)*
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fowler, Rt Hon Sir Norman
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Goodlad, Rt Hon Sir Alastair
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hague, Rt Hon William
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heathcoat-Amory, Rt Hon David
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
Mawhinney, Rt Hon Sir Brian
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spicer, Sir Michael
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Thompson, William
Townend, John
Tredinnick, David
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Wardle, Charles
Waterson, Nigel
Wells, Bowen
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Wilkinson, John
Willetts, David
Wilshire, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Caroline Spelman and Sir David Madel.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brake, Tom
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Burstow, Paul
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cable, Dr Vincent
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*

Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kelly, Ms Ruth
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McFall, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall-Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheffld Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Rayneford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Robertson, Rt Hon George *(Hamilton S)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rogers, Allan
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salmond, Alex
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Sarwar, Mohammad
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shipley, Ms Debra
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Tyler, Paul
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Wigley, Rt Hon Dafydd
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Greg Pope and
Mr. Keith Hill.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 62 (Amendment on Second or Third Reading), and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Ordered,

That Clauses 1 to 4 and Schedules 1 and 2 be committed to a Committee of the whole House.

That the remainder of the Bill be committed to a Standing Committee.

That when the provisions of the Bill considered, respectively, by the Committee of the whole House and by Standing Committee have been reported to the House, the Bill be proceeded with as if the Bill had been reported as a whole to the House from the Standing Committee.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY BILL
[MONEY]

Queen's recommendation having been signified—

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Greater London Authority Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the charging on, and payment out of, the Consolidated Fund of expenditure incurred by returning officers in relation to the holding of the first ordinary election of the Greater London Authority; and

(2) the payment out of money provided by Parliament of—

(a) any expenditure incurred by a Minister of the Crown or government department under or by virtue of the Act; and

(b) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable out of such money under any other Act.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

GREATER LONDON AUTHORITY BILL
[WAYS AND MEANS]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 52(1)(a),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Greater London Authority Bill, it is expedient to authorise—

(1) the making of provision for and in connection with—

(a) the levying of charges on persons using or keeping motor vehicles on roads in Greater London;

(b) the levying of charges on persons providing parking places for motor vehicles in Greater London; and

(c) charges to tax in connection with transfers of property, rights and liabilities; and

(2) the payment of sums into the Consolidated Fund.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

Question agreed to.

Fisheries

[Relevant document: Unnumbered explanatory memorandum submitted by the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food on 7th December 1998 relating to the laying down, for 1999, of certain measures for the conservation and management of fishery resources applicable to vessels flying the flag of Norway and allocating, for 1999, catch quotas between member states for vessels fishing in the Norwegian exclusive economic zone and the fishing zone around Jan Mayen.]

7.16 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Elliot Morley): I beg to move,

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. COM(98)680, relating to the fixing of total allowable catches for 1999 and certain conditions under which they may be fished; and supports the Government's intentions to negotiate the best possible fishing opportunities for British fishermen based on sustainable fisheries management, effective enforcement and the need to ensure that regional differences of fisheries are fully recognised.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I must inform the House that Madam Speaker has selected the amendment in the name of the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown), and also that Madam Speaker has decided that the 10-minutes rule should apply to all Back-Bench speeches.

Mr. Morley: It has become traditional for the House to hold a debate on fisheries in advance of the December meeting of the Fisheries Council, which sets total allowable catches and quotas for the following year.

I know that this is an important occasion for hon. Members who represent fishing constituencies, and, indeed, for all hon. Members who take an active interest in fisheries policy generally. In accordance with that custom and practice, I shall not just focus on the decisions that will be made at the Fisheries Council meeting later this week, important though they are. This is also an opportunity for me to review the key developments in fisheries policy that have occurred over the last year, and to consider the issues that we are likely to face.

It is worth recalling the hazards that fishermen experience, and the tragic loss of life that results all too frequently. This year has been no exception, with 24 lives lost to date. Let me express my condolences to the families of the four men who were lost in the Iona tragedy, and also to the hon. Member for Argyll and Bute (Mrs. Michie). I understand that the men involved in that tragic accident were from fishing families on the island, and I well understand how a small community such as that on Bute must have been affected. I am sure that I speak for the whole House in that regard.

Although I do not have direct responsibility for safety at sea—that falls to my colleagues at the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions—it greatly concerns all of us who are involved with the industry in any way that, all too often, such a high price is paid for the harvesting of one of nature's most generous resources. We have a duty both to improve safety standards and to ensure that we make the best possible use of the fish

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stocks that the industry puts such resources into harvesting. We need to achieve safe and sustainable fisheries for the benefit of all.

Mr. Archy Kirkwood (Roxburgh and Berwickshire): I certainly concur with what the Minister said about the debt that we owe the fishing communities.

Having compared notes with my hon. and learned Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr. Wallace), I have established that this is the 16th year in which our debate has taken place. One thing has not changed, and I should like to hear the Minister's view. I do not see how any Government can expect the industry to respond to such short-term decision making. How can it plan a coherent future when, year after year, we give it so little notice to enable it to make arrangements for its work in the forthcoming year?

Mr. Morley: I accept the hon. Gentleman's point, and intend to touch on it later. The industry does need as much time as possible.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Let me offer the Minister a more precise illustration of the difficulties involved. A new quota system for non-sector vessels comes in on 1 January, and track records of their previous fishing must be submitted by 31 December. That is short enough notice, but the Ministry appears to be unable to make available the track records for relevant years until February. Can the Minister suggest a way out of the Catch 22?

Mr. Morley: Yes. I can answer the right hon. Gentleman's questions. As he knows, we are moving to a new system of quota allocation from 1 January next year. The quantity of fish that producer organisations in non-sector and other groups will be able to catch will be based on a proportion of the catches made by the vessels in each group during the reference period 1994 to 1996.

However, we are making special arrangements for the non-sector vessels joining producer organisations from 1 January 1999 and in subsequent years. Vessel owners will have the choice of taking into producer organisation membership quota units based on either the track record for 1994 to 1996 or the proportion of non-sector catch that the vessel took in the past three years. If the right hon. Gentleman would like the details, which are considerable, I would be only too pleased to write to him and address his concerns.

This year, there have been many new initiatives and I shall to touch on the more significant developments. However, they all contribute to pursuing our objective of improving the operation of fisheries policy.

There are four main themes to our approach. First, we wish to achieve more effective and consistent enforcement of fisheries rules across the Community. Secondly, we want environmental considerations to be integrated more fully in the common fisheries policy, to make it a more effective instrument for conserving fish stocks and the wider marine environment. Thirdly, we want structural and conservation measures to be applied in a way that achieves a sustainable future for the fishing industry and enhances economic opportunity in coastal communities. Fourthly, we would like increased participation by fishermen in the development of fisheries policy. In parallel, we wish to improve the regional dimension of the CFP so that it is more sensitive to local differences.

Those themes provide the broad framework within which the Government pursue fisheries policy. This year, we have taken important strides forward on all fronts. Of course, 1998 began in an untypical way, in that we assumed the presidency of the Fisheries Council for the first six months. Our primary function, as presidency, was to progress the general business of the Council efficiently and expeditiously. I believe that we did so successfully, and I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), who was an outstanding chairman. Under his chairmanship, we made significant progress in a number of our priority areas.

For example, we secured the introduction of new total allowable catches and quotas for North sea stocks, so assisting their conservation as well as safeguarding large shares for UK fishermen. Agreement was reached to phase out the use of high seas tuna drift nets, which will end the unacceptable level of dolphin deaths attributed to those nets. We launched moves to improve enforcement measures which will culminate in the adoption of a new regulation at the December Council later this week. It is very important to the fishing industry to have a common standard and consistency of approach across all member states.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): Does the Minister not recognise that, by imposing designated ports on the industry, he will force fishermen to dump more of their catch dead back into the sea? I know that the object of the exercise is to prevent the landing of black fish, but does he concede that those black fish, instead of being landed and possibly consumed, will now add to the huge quantity of fish that is already dumped back dead into the sea?

Mr. Morley: It is certainly true that quota management results in discards. I do not like the idea of discarding marketable fish any more than the hon. Gentleman does, but it is necessary to have some measure to control over-quota landings. It is difficult to distinguish between a fisherman who may have a small quantity of fish that he has caught by accident and one who is deliberately targeting fish knowing that he has exceeded his quota. I have made it clear to the fishing industry that I am always willing to discuss and consider alternative ways of managing quotas and effort, but at present quota management is applied by all countries, whether or not they are in the CFP. Although there are disadvantages, there are also advantages in terms of fisheries management.

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): I am grateful to the Minister. Does he accept that, although Norway operates quotas, it is illegal there to discard fish and pollute the sea? Is that not a more sensible approach?

Mr. Morley: That is an issue for discussion with the fishing industry. Again, there are advantages and disadvantages. If we insist on landing all species, there are enforcement problems, which the Norwegians are facing. If someone's quota is used up by unmarketable fish, it is difficult to know whether it is being dumped

over the side to make way for marketable fish. There are problems. I acknowledge that there is a genuine debate about the best and most efficient way of managing fisheries and quota, and I am always ready to have discussions with the industry and listen to new ideas.

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): Does the Minister accept that there is a danger of the reverse effect occurring? If we set a precautionary total which is a sharp downswing—for example, the North sea haddock quota this year—and stock is more abundant than is assumed or suggested by scientific advice, there is an automatic increase in discards and, instead of being a conservation device, the system wastes good fish.

Mr. Morley: I accept that that is a potential consequence of major reductions in TAC and quota, and I shall say a few words about that and my meeting with the fishing industry today.

Also in the past year, an agreement was reached to develop and extend the use of regional meetings that increase the involvement of fishermen in CFP discussions. We certainly want to develop that in the coming year.

This year also saw the Commission initiate preparatory work in connection with the review of the CFP which is due to take place before the end of 2002. I know that that is of considerable interest to many right hon. and hon. Members. In the spring, a questionnaire was distributed widely throughout the Community to allow fishing and other interests to provide initial views on the main issues to be addressed and the Commission received a weighty response from UK organisations and individuals. The autumn saw the beginning of a follow-up series of regional meetings to allow the Commission to hear at first hand the views of fishermen and other interests. Four such meetings were held in the UK in October and, as usual, our industry was not backward in putting forward its views and ideas in relation to 2002.

While we are on the subject of the 2002 review, I should like to dispel once and for all the misconceptions held by some about 31 December 2002. Many wild and somewhat reckless claims have been made about what will happen after that date. Let me make it clear to the House that I want to take on some of the most oft-repeated myths and, I hope, lay them to rest. I was tempted to say, "Read my lips," but as that is the expression of an American President it might not be appropriate. I was referring to President Bush, of course.

First, there are claims that the current CFP expires lock, stock and barrel at the end of 2002. Those making such assertions usually go on to raise the spectre that we will be held to ransom by southern member states who will block the adoption of a new regulation so that there is free access to all fish stocks in all Community waters. On that analysis, relative stability, access restrictions and all the other factors that we and the industry value in the present CFP will disappear.

Let me present the facts. The CFP does not lapse at the end of 2002. Under Council regulation 3760/92, member states are required to decide by 31 December 2002, by qualified majority voting, whether any changes are needed to the present arrangements. If no such changes are agreed, with one exception, all the existing provisions of the regulation will be rolled over automatically beyond 2002.

The one exception is the restriction on access by foreign vessels within national six and 12-mile limits. A further derogation will be needed to maintain those provisions beyond 2002. I know that there is concern among UK fishing and coastal interests that the arrangements will not be renewed. Indeed, it is the single most commented-on issue in my postbag concerning the 2002 review. It was raised in the questionnaires and at the consultative meetings.

Let me therefore make it clear that the Government are totally committed to maintaining those important provisions and are convinced that that will be achieved. The fact is that other member states are as interested in protecting their inshore fleets as we are. The restrictions were agreed unanimously when they last came up for renewal in 1992, and I see no reason why there should be any difficulty about their renewal in 2002.

Mr. Gill: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. The six-mile and 12-mile limits that we currently enjoy are part of the derogation to which he has referred. Why does he say that relative stability, in the form of the national allocation of quota that is part of that derogation, will continue in the future? There is no evidence that it will.

Mr. Morley: I made it clear that, in the interpretation of the regulations, the relative stability is not a derogation. That is the view not only of the Government and the Ministry of Agriculture, but of the Commission, its legal advisers and other countries. There is no argument about that in the European Union. I repeat that, unless there is a majority vote to end relative stability, it will continue automatically after 2002.

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): We should not listen to the prophets of doom; the review of the common fisheries policy after 2002 gives us an opportunity to give a more regional dimension to fishing policy. Will the Minister elaborate on that and say whether his discussions with his European counterparts are likely to lead to an increased decentralisation of policy to management at regional or zonal level?

Mr. Morley: Other member states are interested in regional management in the CFP; I shall say a few words about it later.

I am talking about those key elements of the CFP that the fishing industry wants retained after 2002. I hope that minority elements in the UK industry—and some hon. Members who should know better—will stop perpetuating myths that do the fishermen no favours, cultivate unnecessary fears, and distract attention from more meaningful issues. I want in this debate to lay those myths to rest once and for all.

Effort control has been one of the main developments in fisheries policy over the past year. Last December, I explained that, largely as a result of the progress made during negotiations with the European Commission on the UK's detailed plans for implementing multi-annual guidance programme IV, we were able to limit immediate further action in 1998 to the introduction of effort controls in the pelagic and beam trawl segments. The main demersal fleets were spared the imposition of limits.

I also said that our preference was for such controls to be managed by the industry itself, and that there would be detailed discussions with the fishermen on how that

[Mr. Morley]

should be done. On 24 February, I announced that, as a result of those meetings, we were allocating fishing effort among the various producer organisations or groups of fishermen and inviting them to manage their own uptake within the allocations on whatever basis they and their members wanted.

I acknowledged that the introduction of those arrangements was a new departure in fisheries policy and promised that we would keep the position under close review. I am happy to say that, despite some initial delays and uncertainties, the arrangements have generally worked well—the UK fleet remains on course to meet its MAGP IV obligations.

We have today embarked on a further round of discussions with the industry on possible modifications to the arrangements for 1999. We are ready to listen to any reasonable suggestions that are consistent with MAGP requirements and the progress that we are making.

Mr. Andrew George: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way again. Because of unplanned lay-ups in the beam trawl fleet, the days-at-sea target has been undershot. In his negotiations with the industry and the producer organisations, will he allow the unused days to be carried over, as the industry wants?

Mr. Morley: We can consider that in the 1999 arrangements, although the hon. Gentleman should bear in mind the fact that the idea behind the restrictions is to reduce effort. The industry will have an opportunity to put its point of view about how the next phase should operate.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): When all the days at sea have been used, there may still be spare quota because of bad weather or illness, for example. Will my hon. Friend say whether the number of days can be extended to take up that quota, as my local producers organisation believes is the case in Holland?

Mr. Morley: I have heard the assertions about Holland, but they have not been not confirmed. All member states are legally obliged to operate effort controls in line with their MAGP obligations. If any member state does not abide by that legal obligation, the Commission can penalise it, and even refer it to the European Court of Justice. I assure my hon. Friend that we will not hesitate to draw to the Commission's attention any evidence that member states are not complying with their obligations.

I know that many in the industry are now asking whether the progress that we have made on MAGP III and IV is sufficient to make the UK eligible for vessel construction grants under the EU's financial instrument for fisheries guidance. I take this opportunity to make the Government's position clear on the issues involved. First, we would need to clarify with the Commission the progress that we have made on MAGP III and IV and how current performance on effort is to be measured against past performance in capacity terms.

There are much more fundamental issues to do with the justification for such aid and its affordability. I do not want to duck this point, so I shall make clear to the House the Government's feelings about the matter. On the justification of using public money to modernise the fishing fleet, we must assess our priorities in terms of the way in which the Department applies available resources.

We have made resources available within our budget for further decommissioning in relation to some of the overhang from MAGP III and IV. We have also ensured that there is funding for vessel safety grants, for harbour improvements and for marketing and processing grants. That has directed money to adding value, to marketing and to ensuring that fishermen maximise the value of their catch and secure the best returns from it. Directing available resources in the best interests of the industry is one of our priorities.

On the justification of scrap and build, we do not believe that subsidising capital investment in new fishing vessels is necessarily a sensible use of taxpayers' money, especially while effort controls are in force and stocks remain under severe pressure, and we are continuing to decommission capacity in other parts of the fleet. It would simply not be sustainable, either biologically or economically, to encourage the industry to invest at levels which it could not finance from its own resources.

Hon. Members may remember what happened in the 1980s, when grants were last given to improve vessels. As a result of the modernisation of the UK fleet, effort was increased, which meant that unsustainable pressure was put on fish stocks. Having spent large sums of public money on modernisation to increase the capacity of the fishing fleet in the 1980s, we found ourselves in the ludicrous situation of spending large sums of money in the 1990s on decommissioning vessels because of overcapacity. Unless the policy is carefully thought through, that is one of the problems that may arise if public funds are used for modernisation.

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): I noticed that, although most of my hon. Friend's speech has been characterised by fluent discourse—he has been looking his audience straight in the eye—when he came to the language of priorities, he turned to the prepared text in front of him. That suggests to me Treasury talk: "There ain't going to be any money because we won't put up the necessary supplement." Does he accept that our basic problem is that we have an aging fleet—it is 25 or 30 years old—whereas other countries have modernised their fleets, using European money to which we have not had access?

Mr. Morley: My hon. Friend, who is experienced in relation to the industry, has raised an important point. It is true that other countries have modernised their fleets because they have met their full MAGP targets. We have not, but we are making progress to meet those targets—in a way that the previous Administration failed to do. I recognise my hon. Friend's point, and I do not want to duck the issue of the aging fleet. It is for that reason that, in my negotiations with the fishing industry today, I invited it to meet me and departmental officials to look at ways in which we can work together to address the need for investment and modernisation.

In relation to the changes in terms of fixed-quota allocation, fishing licences have acquired a significant value. That could be collateral for investment loans from banks, in the way that any business plans for investment. I have suggested that we explore this potential capital

asset, and see how we can use it to underpin loans that the industry may wish to negotiate with banks to help finance the kind of modernisation and investment that any industry would carry out. That is what I am prepared to do with the industry to address those problems.

Mr. James Wallace (Orkney and Shetland): The Minister has made an interesting statement, which will merit careful consideration. Has he discussed with the banks whether they will accept fishing licences as collateral for substantial loans? What guarantees would the Government and the EU have to give as to the longevity and value of licences over time?

Mr. Morley: We need to resolve those matters in discussion with the industry. I have had discussions with one bank about that very point, and, although I did not raise the matter formally, the indication that I received was that banks would be prepared to consider such an approach. There are issues to resolve, as the hon. and learned Gentleman knows, and that is why it is worth looking at what is achievable, what is not achievable and how we can utilise what has become an asset within the industry. Anyone who knows the industry will know that that can work to the advantage of the industry.

Mr. Anthony Steen (Totnes): What is the point of modernising the fleet if the Minister continues to cut the traditional fisheries of the beam trawlers, so that the amount of fish that can be landed is less and less?

Mr. Morley: I know that the hon. Gentleman is speaking for his constituents, and I respect that. However, he knows as well as I do that over-capacity must be addressed. That involves making difficult decisions, but those decisions must be made. Managing fishing stocks involves decisions about sustainability—some of which are difficult, too. However, our approach means that the investment decisions of individual fishermen would be linked to how they were fishing and the kind of effort that they were making. That would be a more sustainable and logical way of determining investment, rather than giving public money for such investment without any thought for the consequences.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): Modernisation and support with marketing must be in the context of a business plan. Our fishermen feel that our competitors have a long-term vision and a sense of how much production and how many producers they want, but that we do not. What is the Government's long-term vision? How many producers will we have? What is the modernisation aiming towards? Where is the marketing taking us?

Mr. Morley: We must match the available capacity to the available fish stocks. Fish stocks vary from year to year, but it is possible for fishermen to make investment plans. I must emphasise that many fishermen in this country—from all sectors of the fleet—are already making that investment, and are identifying market opportunities and seeking returns on their investment. That is happening now—it is nothing new. I want to see how we can extend that.

Mr. Salmond: Twenty years ago, we had one of the most modern fleets in Europe. Now, we have an aging fleet—its average age is more than a quarter of a century. The Minister was accused by his hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) of reading from a Treasury brief. The Minister said that his hon. Friend was an experienced Member, which meant that he agreed with his hon. Friend, but had to go back to the Treasury brief.

The Minister is departing from one of his clear principles in opposition—that of parity for the fleet in this country with others. Our major competitors have had access to European funding. How will the Minister establish parity for the fleet in this country with what fleets in other countries have received?

Mr. Morley: I cannot go back to what has happened in the past. In terms of the debate about the future structure of fisheries funds, negotiations and priorities, I have already made it clear in the Council of Ministers that I do not believe that subsidising the modernisation of fishing boats is necessarily the best way forward. That should not apply to any member state. There is a role for public finance, on which I will touch in a moment, but there are far more productive ways of using that money than modernising the fishing fleet.

Mrs. Ray Michie (Argyll and Bute): First, may I thank the Minister for his kind words about the tragedy in my constituency, which I will convey to the folk on Iona?

In talking about modernising the fleet, the Minister presumably means that we can go for new build and repairs. Does he agree that that would make a huge difference to the shipyards that we have lost, particularly in Scotland—including the Campbeltown shipyard in my constituency? We need to be building our own fishing boats.

Mr. Morley: I accept that, and I hope that those fishermen who have placed orders for new build and repairs—not necessarily within the UK—have taken note of what the hon. Lady has said.

Mr. Gill: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Morley: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I am sensitive about taking up too much of the House's time when many hon. Members wish to speak. I have been generous in taking interventions, and I hope that he will forgive me if I try to make progress.

I understand the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) made about the Treasury brief and Treasury priorities, but there is no point in denying that there are priorities, and that there is not a limitless pot of public money. Nor is there a magic bank account in Brussels waiting for us to use. Many of the EU funds are, in reality, money contributed by member states. As a net contributor to the EU budget—and despite the rebate arrangements—we pay, in effect, about 71p in every pound for any EU money spent in this country.

The comprehensive spending review, completed this summer, looked in great detail at all aspects of Government expenditure, and concluded that the priorities in the fisheries sector should be continuation of the existing infrastructure and vessel safety grants, together with a further £10.5 million for decommissioning in the fixed-gear segments over the next three years. Our priority is to add value.

[Mr. Morley]

In the year 1997-98, about £38 million was put into the fishing industry and fisheries-dependent areas from EU, central Government and regional government grants. These priorities extend to the period beyond the expiry of the current FIFG and PESCA schemes at the end of 1999. Future EU arrangement are under discussion in the context of the Commission's Agenda 2000 proposals, and we do not know what form they will finally take. We will consult the industry once detailed implementing proposals emerge. It would be wrong for me to allow a false expectation of grants for fleet renewal against the position that I have just set out. As I said in August, following the outcome of the comprehensive spending review, there are limits to what the taxpayer should be asked to support in the absence of a financial contribution from the industry itself.

I have referred to our priorities for fisheries policy and the future structure of the UK fleet. Effective enforcement has an essential role to play. The Government are committed to raising the standard of enforcement both at home and throughout the Community. As a result of the initiatives that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister took at Amsterdam and the action taken during our presidency, the December Fisheries Council will adopt important measures to strengthen monitoring, inspection and surveillance arrangements throughout the Community, leading to much greater co-operation and transparency, which I warmly welcome as a key objective.

Action at Community level is being reinforced by action at home, where we shall continue to devote considerable resources—about £24 million a year—to policing fishing activity in our waters and in our ports. Last month, I confirmed that robust action would be taken to deal with the problem of under-declared landings through the introduction of new controls, including designated ports, for vessels over 20 m.

Our monitoring of fishing activity will be further assisted once satellite monitoring comes into full effect from 1 January 2000. We recently awarded a contract for the development of the UK's monitoring system, which should be fully operational by the middle of next year.

I know that many are concerned that the industry is over-regulated, and the industry certainly made that point in our discussions today, but fishing is a highly complex activity, and some regulation is inescapable. I can assure the House that we will make every effort to restrict additional controls and costs to those that are essential for conserving fish stocks and safeguarding the best interests of fishermen. Let us be clear: honest fishermen have nothing to fear from the controls that we are introducing.

Many of the measures are long overdue, and I regret that many changes have to be introduced in a short period: the industry must think that they are coming thick and fast. Some of the measures should have been introduced many years ago, and we made it clear that we would take action on black fish, enforcement and other problems, some of which the industry has asked us to tackle.

In talks with the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations, the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and Northern Ireland organisations, I offered to set up a working party, on which the industry will be able to join officials to consider how to minimise the impact and bureaucracy of the measures that we will have to introduce. We will work with the industry to ensure that the changes cause the minimum of inconvenience.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): Will the working party have access to the Commissioner?

Mr. Morley: We are introducing national measures as a member state, so access to the Commissioner is not relevant. We will discuss how to apply the measures, and we have some flexibility on the detail of how that is done. We want to hear the industry's point of view so that we can minimise the impact.

We will not shrink from taking difficult decisions. At the beginning of this month, I announced a phased programme of action to link the future registration and licensing of fishing vessels to the declaration of maximum continuous or permanently derated engine power. We must tackle the deliberate under-declaration of engine power if measures to restrict fishing activity and conserve fish stocks are to succeed.

I have heard forceful arguments from those who consider that the measures go too far and from those who consider that they do not go far enough, but I believe that we now have a balanced and proportionate package of measures which should put an end to the under-declaration of engine power without causing long-term hardship for the industry.

We have also acted decisively to resolve the legacy of unresolved problems of quota hopping, which I know to be of concern to many hon. Members. With the agreement of the Commission, we announced in July a package of measures designed to ensure that UK fishing vessels maintain a real economic link with this country. The measures will bring greater benefits to our coastal communities without threatening inward investment in our industry. That is a good deal for the fishing industry, and will achieve much more than the pursuit of unachievable goals such as the removal of quota hoppers from the register.

The measures, combined with designated ports and satellite monitoring, are having an effect on quota hopping and on black fish landings, which have declined. I warmly welcome that. A further area of progress has been the introduction of fixed quota allocations that will take effect from 1 January next year. The new arrangements will create much greater certainty in the industry, and will eliminate the incentive to catch fish simply to maintain quota shares.

That initiative came from the industry itself, and I welcome that involvement, which is an example of how we can take ideas from and hold consultations with the industry and, if there is majority agreement, implement them. The next high-level meeting with the industry, which will be chaired by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Agriculture, will take place on 3 March. We look forward to discussing an agenda proposed by the industry itself.

A great deal of work is still to be done. I am aware of the difficult problems facing our inshore fleet, whose operations are often restricted by factors such as weather conditions and the availability of fish on our inshore grounds. The vessels are hard hit when action has to be taken to close fisheries because quota allocations have been exhausted.

Following discussions with inshore fishermen, we are considering a range of options for improving the current quota management and licensing arrangements for the inshore fleet and I hope to be able to issue a consultative paper early in the new year, seeking views on the way forward. That initiative came up at a very constructive meeting in Hastings, organised by my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Mr. Foster).

I can assure my hon. Friend that we are pursuing all the points that were raised about ways of helping the inshore fleet with its quota management without imposing stops, which I accept cause real problems. The problem that I face as a Minister is that, once the fish stocks are exhausted, we have no option but to close the fishery; but we are looking for alternative methods that the inshore fleet may find helpful.

My hon. Friend may be interested to know that we are also investigating complaints about fishermen who have shortened their boats to get below the 10 m designation and then, allegedly, have lengthened them again. Action is in hand to identify the number of boats that fall into that category and to ensure that they comply. Let me make it clear that the owners of such boats face losing their licence and their livelihood.

It is unfortunate that, as in previous years, the Commission's proposals for total allowable catches and quotas to apply in 1999 have emerged very late in the day. I accept that criticism; we have drawn it to the attention of the Commission, and will do so again. Such lateness does not make it easy for any of us to prepare for the important decisions to be taken at the December Council; but to allow the fullest possible parliamentary scrutiny, we made available as much detail as possible before the formal proposals were published.

Mr. Wallace: Whatever became of multi-annual and multi-species TACs, which I think were agreed in 1992 but were never implemented? They may be a way of avoiding the huge swings that often happen.

Mr. Morley: I believe that there is a role for extending the number of stocks that are managed multi-annually. Of course, the stocks have to be sufficient to apply a multi-annual TAC. Some stocks are so low that it would be very difficult to do that at present. I accept the point, and we want to pursue it with the Commission. The multi-annual TAC on herring, for example, has been a great success, and we want to extend the system where appropriate.

There is no denying that, this year, deeper than usual cuts have been proposed in a number of TACs. To some extent, that reflects the more explicit application of a precautionary approach by the scientists of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea, which has in some cases led to more cautious advice. But the blame cannot be laid at the door of scientists: the fact is that many of our fish stocks have deteriorated over recent years, and are now in a poor state.

There have been some welcome reductions in fishing mortality over the past couple of years, but too many stocks remain dependent on the strength of incoming year classes, so, when there is below-average recruitment, the stock size declines and TACs reduce. Irrespective of the application of the precautionary approach, substantial cuts in some TACs are, unfortunately, necessary to help to rebuild and secure stocks for the future. The fishing industry recognises that action has to be taken if there is evidence that stocks are in decline.

Let me make it clear that the Government are committed to the precautionary approach as the basis for managing fish stocks. Indeed, we have advanced that argument on issues such as increased controls on industrial fishing. A more cautious approach in the shorter term will lead to significant benefits in the longer term as fish stocks grow in response to more sustainable fishing levels. The North sea herring stock, which has just been mentioned, provides a vivid example of how short-term restraint can lead to long-term gain. Severe reductions in catches and fishing effort were imposed on that fishery in 1996 to prevent the stock's collapse. The restrictive regime has been maintained, with the result that the stock size will soon be above safe levels, and is predicted to continue to increase substantially over the next couple of years.

We need further dialogue among fishermen, managers and scientists to refine and develop the application of the precautionary approach. If cuts are violent and too changeable, fishermen cannot plan, and find it hard to adapt. However, it is difficult to fault the concept in principle, and the fishing industry accepted at the meeting today that it had a role to play. Sensibly applied, the precautionary principle offers a sound way forward for fisheries management.

I know that fishermen are concerned about the extent of cuts in TACs proposed by the Commission, and I share their concern for a number of stocks. I am mindful of the need to take into account the social and economic effects on the industry of excessive year-on-year fluctuations in TACs. I met the leaders of the UK industry this afternoon and we had a full discussion about their concerns and priorities. I was able to assure them that, at the Fisheries Council this week, we will argue for the TACs proposed to be increased if that is compatible with the scientific advice and the conservation of stocks.

However, I emphasised the need for our approach to be realistic and responsible if we are not to undermine the recovery of stocks from some of the low levels that now exist. The fishermen at the meeting made several helpful and constructive points in relation to the negotiations on TACs, and I will do my best to address those points at the Fisheries Council.

Mr. Blizzard: Although it is proposed that the TACs for many species should be reduced, an increase is recommended for some species. Can my hon. Friend assure me that, in the negotiations in Brussels, he will resist any attempt to try to trade off one species against another, so that, for example, an increase in plaice, which is caught readily by Lowestoft fishermen, will not be traded off for an increase in another species? Will he assure me that he will stick to TACs based on scientific evidence?

Mr. Morley: I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. There is good news on plaice for the fishing industry, in that the scientific advice has recommended an increase in the plaice TAC. I welcome that.

The Government's overall objective is to achieve sustainable management of fisheries so that stocks recover, fishermen's livelihoods are safeguarded and the

[Mr. Morley]

wider marine environment is conserved. A good start has been made in the 18 months or so since we came to office. We are committed to providing the conditions for a prosperous, stable and sustainable fishing industry.

We have tackled our priorities in a way that the previous Government could not. I do not blame my predecessors as Fisheries Minister, because they tried to do their best for the industry, but they found it impossible to advance the case for the British fishing industry against the background of a party and Government riven by splits on Europe. They were paralysed when taking decisions and dealing with the outstanding problems with which we have had to deal in the short time we have been in office. Unfortunately, there is little evidence that the splits that so disabled the previous Government have improved in the present Conservative party.

I have made it clear that, when tough decisions have to be taken on fisheries management, the Government will take them, but we will ensure that the long-term future of the fishing industry is maintained, that we have sustainable fisheries and that our actions—after consulting the fishing industry at every opportunity—are taken for the long-term benefit of the industry. We have seen some progress. This year, the black fish problem has declined, prices have improved for most of the fishing industry, and it has been a good year for many sections of the fleet. We want to ensure that that prosperity continues next year and for the future.

8.5 pm

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): The Minister was right to remind us that, although this debate is taking place before the meeting of the Fisheries Council, it has traditionally been an opportunity to discuss the fishing industry in its entirety. I commend him for touching on a number of points that are clearly of great interest to Members on both sides of the House. However, I did not think much of his penultimate paragraph, and I can understand why he kept his worst point to almost the end. I shall deal with it in a moment.

The Minister was also right to remind the House what a dangerous industry fishermen work in. In some ways, it is almost an anachronism, with fatalities every year. In 1997, the report of the marine accidents investigation branch shows that 29 fishermen died. Because I represent a west country seat, I remember incidents that affected the west country, including, for example, the loss of the Margaretha Maria. Only last week, a fisherman died in Brixham and, in June, five Scottish fishermen died off the coast of Denmark when their ship was cut in half by a German freight vessel. Fishing is a dangerous industry and the Minister was right to preface his remarks by drawing our attention to that fact.

The Minister was reported in the press as having described the proposed cuts as "ferocious". After examination of the proposals, it appears that they will not be quite as ferocious as we feared, but the Minister was honest enough to admit that the cuts suggested under the precautionary principle will be deep. I shall deal with that point at some length.

This is the first time that I have spoken in a fisheries debate from the Front Bench, but I have spoken from the Back Benches on several occasions. Since holding this portfolio, I have made it my business to go round and see the fishing industry and find out what fishermen's concerns are. Sometimes, their concerns are precisely what I would have expected, and sometimes other issues come up.

The industry has raised several matters of deep concern to it. The first is the matter of the working time directive, which is a wholly inappropriate mechanism to be applied to the United Kingdom fishing industry. Originally, the directive allowed for an exemption, which was clearly right, but that exemption is now under threat because, when the Government adopted the principle of the social chapter, they sold the pass on their ability to argue that some industries cannot function under such a directive. Jim Porters, the widely respected member of the South West Fish Producers Organisation, said:

"The implications of this Directive will have far reaching effects. Owners of larger vessels will have difficulty finding crews prepared to work strict patterns of working hours. Smaller vessels will be unable to operate and comply with the requirements. Where there are 2 men working, compulsory rest periods would be impossible."

I think that it is quite clear that, if the working time directive goes ahead in anything approaching its present shape, share fishing as we currently understand it in the United Kingdom will simply cease.

Mr. Morley: I wish to update the hon. Gentleman on the progress that we are making on the working time directive. We accept that it does not reflect the patterns of work of share fishermen. The hon. Gentleman will know that the negotiations on the working time directive are not a matter for my Department, but I understand that the Commission has accepted the arguments and will, for example, exempt share fishermen from the four days compulsory holiday. The Commission is beginning to appreciate the argument that the share fishermen's working patterns are not compatible with the working time directive.

Mr. Nicholls: I am grateful to the Minister for making that point. For a moment, I thought that he was going to avail himself of the well-known "not me guv" defence. However, as far it went, what he had to say made interesting hearing, and clearly we shall want to study the detail in due course.

Another major concern, which the Minister touched on, is the rising cost of licences and track records. Prices that are already sky-high are given a further twist with the introduction of new rules to combat under-declaration of engine power. That will force many fishermen to buy extra licence units to match their real engine power. The prices for such units are spiralling far out of reach of ordinary fishermen, and fears are mounting that the fleet will rapidly fall into the hands of big companies.

There are also fears that the fleet will stagnate because so few fishermen will be able to afford the licences and no one will be able to build new boats or modernise existing stock. Clearly, a slump in building and modernisation affects the industry as a whole. Time will not allow me to deal in detail with the question of safety, but problems often arise with older fishing boats. Such factors must be taken into account when we consider the lack of modernisation of the fleet. In addition, fishermen have expressed to me their grave anxiety that speculators will move in and buy up quotas before renting them back to fishermen at inflated prices.

The Minister was fair enough to mention the real concern about policing and enforcement in the United Kingdom, and about the lack of overall uniformity and transparency among our European partners. We are aware that a European Union inspection force will be established to try and achieve that uniformity, but, although I do not for a moment doubt the Minister's good faith in relying on that, I do not share what I took to be his optimism. The cultural differences between the UK on the one hand and France and—especially—Spain on the other mean that it is difficult to have any great hope that greater uniformity and transparency will be achieved. Frankly, I doubt it.

The crushing weight of bureaucracy on the industry at times leaves individual fishermen feeling deeply depressed. The effects of that bureaucracy and regulation—and we all accept that there has to be some regulation—are so oppressive and burdensome that for some fishermen the problem has been the last straw and they have left the industry as a result. No hon. Member could regard that with anything other than extreme concern.

Mr. Steen: Is my hon. Friend aware that thousands of new rules and regulations come in from Europe every year? I am a member of the Select Committee on Deregulation, which has not managed to deregulate one new regulation. Is that because the Minister has not fed into the system opportunities to reduce the regulatory mechanism on our hard-pressed fishermen?

Mr. Nicholls: I shall answer for many things, but not for the Minister. There is clearly something in what my hon. Friend says. The industry is consumed by regulation. For reasons that I shall explain, the common fisheries policy is not a suitable vehicle for the protection of fish. It is not acceptable in terms of conservation and, as far as fishermen are concerned, it does not do the job.

I was pleased to hear the Minister address an idea that sounds almost comically bizarre but which I know to be true. Certain boats are reduced to less than 20 m in length by having bits cut off, then those bits are bolted on again afterwards. Interestingly, I received a letter from John Gale of Folkestone Trawlers Ltd. He said that, in September, the Minister told a meeting of fishermen in Hastings that

> "he would address the serious problem of over 10 metre vessels fishing with under 10 metre licences."

I am sure that Mr. Gale will be as pleased as we to hear that that problem will be dealt with.

Mr. Morley: It is under way.

Mr. Nicholls: The Minister says that the matter is under way. We look forward, in due course, to hearing more detail about that also.

I want to ask the Minister about fixed quota allowances and their legality. The Government now admit that vessels have been fishing during the reference period whose horsepower and vessel capacity units were under-declared with respect to their licences. The licence states categorically that it is invalidated if such details differ from those entered on the licence itself. It has been put to me on a number of occasions that, as the vessels involved were fishing illegally during the reference period, the validity of the FQAs must be brought into question. That strikes me as a fair point. If the Under–Secretary of State for Scotland, the hon. Member for Western Isles (Mr. Macdonald) is unable to deal with it when he winds up the debate, I should be grateful if he could write to me about it.

I am anxious that other hon. Members should be able to contribute to the debate, but the matters that I have raised are among the most important and salient points that people right across the industry have brought to my attention.

Initially, the Minister was quoted as describing the tax and quota proposals as "ferocious", and that has not been denied. However, I am afraid that there is a ritual element to debates such as this. The Minister of the day, whoever it is, allows it to bruited abroad that the quotas will be dreadful and ferocious. In due course, the Minister goes to Europe and battles away valiantly, with the result that he returns with a deal that, rather than being awfully dreadful, is merely dreadful. A great triumph is then proclaimed. I have been in politics long enough that, in opposition, I recognise that ritual as clearly as I did when I was a Minister.

The quota system is wholly unsatisfactory. We cannot begin to get to grips with what to do about it unless we acknowledge where it started. The problems are endemic to the origins of the common fisheries policy, and stem directly from the arrangements announced to the House as long ago as 13 December 1971. On that morning, a principle was agreed in Europe to ensure that the six original members of the European Community were able to have access to our waters. The principle was conceded that there should be equal access to a common resource.

I wish to make it absolutely clear that not for one moment do I impugn the motives of those Ministers at the time who came back with that deal and thought that it was right and proper, but if politicians cannot review matters with the benefit of hindsight, they are not making use of the tools available to them. However the solution may have looked all those years ago in 1971, it looks different now. Any deal based on the principle of equal access to a common resource lies at the root of the problems that bedevil the industry to this day, as—apart from a few derogations here and there—it meant that what used to be our well conserved waters could be fished out by our partners.

We have to be honest about that, and I accept that that honesty must come more from Conservative Members than others. Unless we are prepared to point out what happened, we cannot get to grips with the circumstance in which we find ourselves. The effect of that deal means today that, although Britain owns four fifths of what is now the European Union common fisheries stocks, it is left with just two fifths by volume and only one sixth by value. That is the measure of what has happened to our fishing industry since 1971.

What was represented at the time as a policy designed in the interests of conservation has proved to be a conservation disaster. The policy was based on the ludicrous proposition that fish stocks can be conserved by throwing dead fish back into the sea. That proposition is implicit in the quota system and no quota system that resembles in any way what operates under the common fisheries policy can be devised without it.

[Mr. Nicholls]

The situation is appalling. If time allowed, I could give the House a great many figures to show how bad it is, but I emphasise that the figures that I am about to give are not the fault of fishermen. When I talk about discards and the monstrosity that is involved when millions of dead fish are thrown back into the sea, I am talking about a failure of the political process, not of the fishing industry.

It has been estimated that, this year, about 45 million saithe will be caught wrongly because the quota will have been exceeded. What will happen to them? There are two possibilities. They will either be subject to an illegal landing and dealt with as black fish— we can all condemn breaches of the law, but fishermen consider that the moral point is that the fish are already dead—or the fish will simply be thrown back into the sea.

It has already been noted that it is all very well to speak of designated ports and about extra efforts to ensure that illegal landings are stopped. However, the consequence is that more dead fish are thrown back into the sea. If that were not bad enough, the common fisheries policy institutionalises the legal catching of fish that have not even reached the age of reproductive maturity. Indeed, the Ministry has stated:

"The large majority of fish discarded by fishermen are small and of low or no commercial value."

Yet, at a meeting of the Fisheries Council on 30 October, the United Kingdom voted with all the member states except Denmark to reduce the minimum landing size of three species—hake, plaice and megrim—to well below breeding size. On that occasion, it appears that the Government's reasoning for the reduction was that they recognised that it was wasteful to require the discarding of fish that were marketable and which, in practice, were caught as part of a mixed species.

Anyone who wonders whether there is any validation for the idea—or any other way to go about it—that one can legally catch fish stocks that have not reached the age of reproductive capacity, could do no better than read the 1995-96 report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, No. 25. The Committee was discussing European Union minimum landing sizes and fish maturity and said:

"For many species of fish the minimum permitted landing size is set at or about the length at which 50 per cent. or more of the stock is likely to be mature. For some, however, the minimum landing size is such that well over half of the fish caught will be immature. This is a particular problem with species including cod, saithe and pollack."

That is the position. Under our system, under-age fish can be legally caught and, if the quota has been exceeded, simply discarded and thrown back into the sea. One only has to consider the effects of throwing millions upon millions of dead fish back into the sea every year to realise what we are dealing with.

Mr. Morley: No one disputes the wastefulness of throwing marketable fish back into the sea, but that is a result of quota management and fisheries conservation. If the hon. Gentleman does not like quota management, what is his alternative? For example, is it days at sea?

Mr. Nicholls: That is a fair question, and I will deal with it in my speech. In the space of a few seconds the hon. Gentleman just talked of conservation, but noted that it is based on dead fish. Frankly, that approach is endemic in the policy. The common fisheries policy cannot be run as if dead fish were a regrettable necessity, as has been said in an intervention—on that occasion, the Minister agreed. The harder that one bears down on quotas, the greater the rate of discard, leaving fishermen with the alternative of black landing or tossing the fish back into the sea.

We can examine the effect of the proposals on the fishing industry, area by area, and other hon. Members may well do so. As I come from the west country, I shall deal purely with the situation in area VII, the western waters, to allow other hon. Members time to speak. In areas VIIb-k there would be a reduction of 22 per cent. for cod; in area VIId, a reduction of 20 per cent. for sole; and in areas VIIf and g a reduction of 18 per cent. for plaice. In the Bristol channel, that will mean a reduction in catches from 1,100 to 900 tonnes. The industry has suggested to me that the reductions in the Bristol channel catches do not seem to be driven by any particular principle, but are merely a macho gesture towards the precautionary approach.

The problem is that the situation is not all bad. An increase is proposed for area VIId. However, increasing the plaice catch automatically affects sole, as both will be caught at the same time, so more sole will be brought up and, once again, fishermen will be in the business of returning them dead to the sea or trying a black landing. I can do no better to illustrate how appalling the cuts would be for the west country, if they go ahead in anything approaching their present form, than to give the following example.

A French and an English boat could be fishing side by side in the English channel. The English boat brings up plaice that is in excess of its quota, so they are thrown back, dead. The French boat beside it can catch and land the plaice legally.

Mr. Morley: If it is within the quota.

Mr. Nicholls: The hon. Gentleman says that the French would be within their quota, and that is so. I am coming to the quota figures. The fact is that the west country has a dreadful deal, as my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) knows even better than I.

Mr. Morley: Who negotiated it?

Mr. Nicholls: The Minister is bleating from a sedentary position, but as I said at the beginning of my remarks, to some extent Fisheries Ministers from both sides of the House have found themselves in a not dissimilar position. The point is not merely to bleat from a sedentary position, "Who did it? It's not my fault, guv," but to face up to what is happening honestly and come up with a proposal that may offer some way forward.

I was revealing the fact that those two boats could be sailing side by side, but in area VIIb-k, the French would have a cod allocation of 76 per cent. and the English, an allocation of 8 per cent; for plaice, it would be 54 per cent. for the French and 29 per cent. for the English. In area VIId and e, there would be a 52 per cent. quota for the French for sole, but 23 per cent. for the English. In areas VIIb-k, there would be a 60 per cent. allocation for

the French for whiting and 11 per cent. for the English. For hake, it would be 45 per cent. for the French and 18 per cent. for the English; and, for megrim, the allocation would be 36 per cent. for the French and 14 per cent. for the English. That is the effect that the cuts and the policy would have on fishing in the west country. It is a dire prospect.

The effect of effort limitation on the west country has been mentioned and other hon. Members may take it up. The United Kingdom fleet has a small hangover from MAGP III, which is added to the cuts of MAGP IV. That beam trawl segment is split between the North sea and area VII for the purposes of MAGP IV cuts. The combination of those cuts will amount to about 11 per cent. in western waters. The south-west fish producer fleet spends 13 per cent. of its time in the North sea. That effort must be cut by 21 per cent. The remaining 87 per cent. has to be cut by 11 per cent. Although the south-west fleet effort must be cut by 12.3 per cent., over four years that amounts to about 3 per cent. a year. That fleet has great economic significance for the south-west and catches about half the English white fish catch, but it is expected to absorb the effects of another cut in its prime source of income, Dover sole. That position is unsustainable.

The Parliamentary Secretary referred somewhat speedily—I can well understand why—to the fact that fishermen and scientists sometimes do not agree on the science of the matter. Over and again, if one really talks to the fishermen who are out there catching fish and whose livelihoods depend on it, they say that their experience is different from that of the scientists. One only has to look at some of the comments of scientists who have been putting their views to Ministers, which have been reported in recent days.

To understand that, one only has to look at some of the recently reported comments of scientists who obviously have something to say and have been putting their views to Ministers. Dr. Euan Dunn, a marine policy officer at the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, said:

"We regard this as a watershed in fisheries management, a real sea-change. It may change the boom and bust cycle."

You bet it will change the boom and bust cycle. I do not know where Dr. Dunn has been in recent times, but there will be no boom, and bust will be the order of the day. He goes on to conclude:

"Fishermen are certainly going to have to tighten their belts."

I should like to meet a fisherman who has any belt-tightening left to do. After telling fishermen to tighten their belts, Dr. Dunn adds:

"But they should see better catches and bigger fish in possibly as little as five years."

I do not mean to use parliamentary privilege to pick on a humble scientist, but if I or Dr. Dunn were to be told, "We might be able pay your salary in five years' time, with a bit of luck," we might conclude that we would not be around to draw it.

Considering the basis on which the science has accumulated, remarks such as Dr. Dunn's certainly make one think. What confidence can one have in figures that do not contain an accurate estimate of the amount of fish brought up from the deep? I can do no better than to quote from Michael Wigan, who is a well-respected writer on fisheries matters. He says:

"A scientifically led fishery, to which the CFP aspires, requires solid data. In the CRP the data is not in the least bit solid."

He continues:

"Illegal landings are a bane of the CFP, or any fishery which aspires to scientific management. They were reckoned in 1996 to be around 40 per cent. of all North Sea catches."

He concludes by asking:

"If the take is relative guesswork, how can the forecasts be accurate?"

The fishermen to whom I talk have no confidence whatsoever in the science of supply. Time does not allow me to go into the subject, but hon. Members need only consider the gadoid outburst in the North sea during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, when the fishermen's estimate of what was going on was proved right and the scientists' estimates were wildly out. It is asking too much of fishermen to ask them to accept that the scientists are always right. Fishermen tell me, and I agree, that if the scientific community took a little more regard of their experience at sea, we might be in a better position to make progress.

If we are to have any fish left in British waters, or any British fishermen left to fish those fish in British waters, we need an approach that is radically different from simply trying to operate the common fisheries policy, which has been fundamentally flawed from its inception.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I have been listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman's speech. I am intrigued by the fact that he and his hon. Friends have not tabled an amendment to the motion. Why is that?

Mr. Nicholls: The motion is a take-note motion; that is what the Government are asking the House to do. I wanted to listen to what the Minister had to say and so discover not only what his negotiating tactics were, but whether he could offer any real ideas about how to make progress in future. I did the Minister the courtesy of listening to his speech, but all I heard was a defence of the indefensible, as he said that he would do the best he could with a thoroughly unsatisfactory system, but that he would not make any attempt to analyse the root causes of why the system is so bad, or propose anything that would address the problems.

We need a radically different approach. We need to bring back under national control our own fishing grounds, with sensible bilateral agreements and recognition of the historic rights of other countries—*[Interruption.]* Now we see the true face of the Minister and the depth of his commitment: the moment it is suggested that he should adopt a tough negotiating stance in Europe, he has not got the will to stand up. Until we bring our waters back under national control, be that achieved through zonal management, coastal management, or some other way, we shall be faced year after year with cuts that wreck what is left of the British fishing industry and do absolutely nothing to foster conservation.

Mr. Morley: I am disappointed in the hon. Gentleman. His solution to quota management is to repatriate the fisheries policy. That policy is subject to a veto by other member states, so that is hardly realistic. Norway has control of its fisheries management, but still applies quota management measures. That brings me back to the point I made earlier: in any form of fishery, there has to be some management, so what is his alternative to quota

[Mr. Morley]

management? An exclusive fisheries policy is not achievable in the way that he suggests, so to raise it as a possibility misleads fisherman. In addition, it offers no solutions to the real problems of fisheries policy. What is his alternative?

Mr. Nicholls: There we have it—the authentic voice of the Labour party. The part of that intervention that matters was the part when the Minister said, "We can't do anything about it, because we do not have a veto." What he was actually saying is, "We can't do anything about it, because Europe won't let us." We saw no determination on the part of the Minister to tell Europe, courteously and carefully, "We shall not allow this situation to continue." That is why I say to him that, far from scaring the fishing industry, a policy of bringing back under national state control our fishing policy and our fishing stocks—*[Interruption.]* The Minister can barrack and heckle as much as he wants, but he will have to listen to what I say, even if he does not like it.

Mr. Blizzard: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Nicholls: I shall deal with the organ grinder first.

My suggestion does not scare fishermen; it offers them some hope that a truly dreadful situation can be dealt with. We have to bring fisheries policy back under national control, so that we are responsible for conserving our own fishing stocks and making our own decisions.

Mr. Wallace *rose—*

Mr. Nicholls: I see that there is another federalist in the Chamber. I will give way to the hon. and learned Gentleman in a moment so that he can say how Britain cannot possibly stand up to Europe or make progress in this area.

The Minister asked, in effect, whether that right will be ceded voluntarily. Of course the answer is no. If we turn to the Europeans and say, "Do you mind if we take back the management of our fishing grounds?", they will say, "No, that is not on". The Government must have the political will to tell our European partners that we cannot go on like this.

Mr. Blizzard: When the Conservatives were in government they tried exactly the same tactics with beef. The beef ban got them nowhere. Why does the hon. Gentleman think that any Government would be able to adopt the same approach successfully with fish?

Mr. Nicholls: The hon. Gentleman has not noticed that we are dealing with fish, not beef.

I do not think for one moment that a Labour Government would be successful in making such an approach to Europe. They are not prepared to stand up to Europe and say that certain demands and conditions must be met.

Mr. Gill: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and I congratulate him on saying some things that have wanted saying for a long time. Is my hon. Friend aware that he is not alone in those views? Last year, the shadow Foreign Secretary, our right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), said:

"There are several areas where the EU is exercising powers which could be devolved to the member states."

He continued:

"Another candidate for repatriation is fisheries policy . . . Fishing grounds out to 200 miles or the median line could be brought back under national control, with sensible bilateral agreements and recognition of the historic rights of other countries."

Mr. Nicholls: My hon. Friend is right: it can be done. However, it requires an effort of will to bring it about.

The Minister put his finger on the problem without realising it when he pointed out that his Government will not make that effort of will. That is not my prediction: I am not being unkind to the Labour party when I say that it will not make that effort of will, because it has shown that it will not do so.

The Minister referred, rather unwisely, to quota hopping. The history of quota hopping in recent times is instructive. When the previous Government were in office, they stressed that they would not sign the Amsterdam treaty until that practice was reformed. They made it clear that no progress would be made at Amsterdam until quota hopping was dealt with. The previous Government said:

"The IGC won't come to a successful conclusion until we are satisfied that among our other objectives the problem of quota hopping is resolved satisfactorily."

What was the hon. Gentleman's response at that time?

Did he say, "No, that is completely impossible; we cannot possibly talk about quota hopping in that way to our partners?" No, he did not. The hon. Gentleman was not the only one commenting on the situation. The then Leader of the Opposition, the present Prime Minister, was asked whether he would adopt a similar position at Amsterdam if he were in office. He said:

"We certainly have not ruled out holding up IGC business in order to get the right changes to fishing policy in the British interest . . . Where Britain's interests are at stake, we are perfectly prepared to be isolated. Of course we are."—[*Official Report*, 9 June 1998; Vol. 313, c. 969-970.]

The point is not that the Government went to Amsterdam and failed, but that they did not even try. Instead of doing what he had said he would do only weeks before in opposition, the Prime Minister and the Government gave in.

Instead of making it clear to Europe that the Government would stand by the interests of British fishermen, the Prime Minister entered into an exchange of correspondence with Jacques Santer. It was a case of "Dear Tony" and "Dear Jacques". An argument was constructed off the back of that correspondence that quota hopping had been dealt with. When the Prime Minister tried to address the issue domestically and exploit it, Jacques Santer issued a reprimand by saying that nothing in the exchange of correspondence would prevent a challenge to the European Court if quota hopping were dealt with on the basis of economic effort, which it is not.

A number of criteria must be taken into account if quota hopping is dealt with in accordance with that exchange of correspondence. The Spanish are on record as saying that they reserve the right to challenge that, but it is possible to stand up for our position; we said what we would do, and they agreed that it could be done.

Mr. Wallace: I have been listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman, and he has not yet answered the critical

question. If we had a national fisheries conservation policy, what would be his management tool, given that he has ruled out quota management? How would he manage conservation in our waters even with a national policy?

Mr. Nicholls: I am not ruling out quota management at all. If we are responsible for managing our policy and conserving our stocks and if decisions are made by Parliament, there is a far better chance of achieving conservation. It would be incredible if we tried to work for ever on the principle that there should be equal access to fish in British waters.

Mr. Townend: If our partners in Europe, who have pillaged our fish, refused to agree to our proposals and vetoed them, as hon. Members have suggested they very well might, should not the House amend the European Communities Act 1972 to regain control of fishing in our national waters so that we can have a strong fishing industry, such as those in Norway or Iceland?

Mr. Nicholls: It is sometimes suggested that the House has lost the ability to amend the 1972 Act. As a lawyer, I say that that is wrong, and lawyers who are a great deal more eminent than me have reached the same conclusion. My hon. Friend asked a straightforward question and I shall give him a straightforward answer—yes, it would be possible to amend the Act. However, there is no reason why it should come to that.

When we come back into office and are in a position to find out what is the precise state of the common fisheries policy, we shall make it clear that we have a number of irreducible demands that we expect to be met. We shall be as resolute in demanding and obtaining those requirements as Baroness Thatcher was many years ago when she insisted on the initial rebate. The Labour party told us at the time that it was simply impossible to go to Europe and insist on that rebate. When the Europeans believed that they were faced with a Government who were prepared to stand by their principles, they conceded the rebate. It would be the same in this case.

Mr. Salmond: A few moments ago, the hon. Gentleman mocked an RSPB scientist for telling fishermen to wait four or five years before there was a change. How many years does he estimate fishermen will have to wait before the Conservative party forms an Administration?

Mr. Nicholls: For once, I sympathise with the hon. Gentleman. It would be in the interests of the country and the fishing community if the Government admitted that they were wrong, went away and let us take over. I cannot envisage that happening, but I agree this far with the hon. Gentleman—there is not the slightest chance of the fishing community getting the deal that it needs on the basis of what we have heard tonight. That will not happen until a Conservative Government are returned, therefore—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. There is far too much background noise in the Chamber, which is unfair to the hon. Member who is addressing the House.

Mr. Nicholls: Therefore, as I was about to say, the sooner a Conservative Government are returned, the better.

The Minister sought almost to explain away the question of territorial waters and the 12-mile limit and said that, as far as relative stability is concerned, that limit did not automatically lapse. We could have an argument about that, but I accept that we need not have it this evening. He admitted that the effect of article 14(2) of document 3760/92 was that, without a fresh derogation, the protection of the 12-mile limit will lapse at one minute past midnight in 2003. There is no doubt about that, and I see that the Minister is nodding. The line that he takes, in a very bright and breezy way, is, "There's no problem. We're bound to get a unanimous decision; everyone is in favour of it." However, everyone is not in favour.

If the Minister studies the record and stops talking so glibly, he will find that, when the Spaniards are fighting for what they want, they drive a very hard bargain. One only has to remember the way they behaved in 1994 when their consent was being sought to the enlargement of the Community—they insisted on being given extra fishing rights then as a condition of their co-operation.

There is not the slightest doubt that, if there is to be unanimity on giving us a new derogation, the Minister is going to have to pay a heavy price for it. It would have been a great deal better if, instead of pretending that a unanimous vote was a mere formality, he had told us what price he expects to pay, or, indeed, what price he may already have had to pay.

Of course, the reason that the Minister needs unanimous agreement, and that he will pay whatever price is necessary to get it, is that if the derogation is achieved only by a majority—whether a simple or a qualified majority—the countries that disagree will say that it is a discriminatory regulation, and they will challenge it before the European Court of Justice. No one knows what the effect of such an application would be, but it follows as night follows day that, if the derogation is extended without unanimity, it will discriminate against those who have not agreed to it, and a challenge can then be made in the European Court of Justice. It is clear that the Minister is not going to run that risk for one moment.

It comes down to this: what we needed to hear this evening was not just a statement by the Minister to the effect that he was going to do his level best in Europe, but that he had some understanding of why it is that, year after year, we find ourselves in this position. He had nothing to say about that, but there is a way forward. We need a Government who are prepared to be absolutely resolute in demanding what is necessary in the interests of their countrymen and in the interests of conservation. The Government need the sort of resolution that we showed when we got the original rebate. The Minister would have done the fishing industry some good had he been prepared to tackle that. Instead, when he was offered a way of ensuring that real progress could be made, all he could do was sit and jeer.

8.47 pm

Mr. Frank Doran (Aberdeen, Central): It is always a pleasure to take part in the annual fisheries debate, which seems to have acquired certain traditions—we are getting North sea weather and the traditional approach from the Conservative party, now in opposition. The Conservatives are rewriting history, pretending that they were not in government for 18 years. Judging by what we heard from the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), we can

[Mr. Frank Doran]

take some comfort from the fact that it is very unlikely that he will ever be in government. He will have to go and swing his handbag somewhere else.

It is a matter of concern that this is the one occasion in the year that we have the opportunity to speak about fisheries. Those of us who represent fishing constituencies take the issue seriously. Looking at the clock, I think it likely that we will be lucky to have 45 minutes for Back Benchers' contributions. The rant from the hon. Member for Teignbridge took well over 40 minutes, which does a disservice to the fishing communities that want to be heard.

I welcome the Minister's important statement. He spelled out the tremendous progress that has been made in the 18 months since our party came to power. We are providing a stable framework for the industry, and real advances have been made in the United Kingdom and in Europe. Our policy of constructive engagement, rather than shouting from the sidelines, is paying dividends.

Mr. Hayes: The hon. Gentleman says that real advances have been made in the past 18 months. Would he care to list them? What advances have been made in terms of the industry's profitability and production and the way the fishermen are being treated?

Mr. Doran: I shall not list them, because enough time has already been spent on such questions, but I shall give the hon. Gentleman one example. The hon. Member for Teignbridge spoke about the crisis in the fishing industry. I do not know what the industry is like in his constituency, but the catchers in my area are happy with the high prices that they now get on the quayside for their fish. One reason for that is that we now have a proper management policy, under which black fish is not the commodity that it was; it has virtually disappeared in my part of the country. The fishing industry now receives proper prices for its product.

The Minister acknowledged that the industry is disappointed by the cuts in TAC that are likely to be negotiated later this week. In the north-east, we are concerned in particular about the cut in the haddock quota, but a combination of enforcement and changes in market conditions has virtually eradicated the problem of black fish from north-east Scotland.

Although we all have to accept—certainly I accept—that the only way forward at the moment is the precautionary approach, we are worried that the scientists are being far too cautious in their approach to quotas. One of the issues that concerns me most is discards.

Mr. Gill: Does the hon. Gentleman not recognise the tremendous contradiction between stopping the landing of black fish and increasing the volume of fish that is dumped back dead into the sea? Can he reconcile himself to the fact that less than half the fish caught by fishermen reach the plate? Is that a regime that he wants to go on supporting?

Mr. Doran: I do not think that any of us is happy with that situation, but we need a system that regulates the fishing industry and leads to a sustainable fishing industry for the longer term. At the moment, the quota system is the best we have. The way to improve the system is not to abolish it, which seems to be Conservative policy—despite the fact that the Conservative Government worked with that system for 18 years—but to ensure that it is properly managed. It is managing the fishing industry that is important.

Several positive developments were mentioned by the Minister. I do not need to repeat them, but there are a couple of worrying signs to which I should like to draw attention. One is the aging fleet. The Minister dealt with that, but it is a problem that needs to be tackled. Also, we have a major problem with the boom-and-bust nature of the industry, which is linked to quotas.

Fishing is a difficult business to run, no matter what part of the industry people are in. All the problems of other businesses are there, with the additional uncertainty over the availability from year to year of the primary product.

We have had several years of quotas based on scientific advice, and we have heard some controversy about the differences between the industry and the scientists, but for the long-term interests of our fishing industry, I would like us to move towards the goal of a sustainable fishing industry and also try to achieve some stability in quotas and TACs, so that the industry can start to do some long-term planning with a degree of certainty, which it does not seem to be able to do at the moment. I hope that that is part of Government policy; I would like to hear the Minister's reply on it.

Another worrying development is what seems to be the growing market in quotas. Some vessels are trading their quotas, or parts of them, like any other commodity. We appreciate the value that those licences and quotas have, but it was recently reported in the Scottish press that the quota owned by the inheritor of the licences that were operated by the Silvery Seas, another boat that was involved in a tragedy earlier this year, was sold for £5.5 million.

I have no way of knowing whether those press reports were accurate. The people to whom I have spoken in the industry cannot tell me, but that creates serious problems for the industry—one in particular: how are we going to attract new entrants to the industry if they have to face that hurdle? It will become an industry that is controlled by big business. It will not be the traditional industry that we all grew up with. Anyone whose parent does not operate an existing licence and quota is likely to find it virtually impossible to break into the industry.

My main constituency concern is for the other side of the industry: the fish processing sector. There are several problems. One of the paradoxes of the industry is that, when one side is doing well, the other tends to do not so well. In the past year, catchers have had a good year, with reasonable supplies of fish and good prices at the quayside. Reduced quotas will probably mean increased prices. Profit margins will be maintained, but the picture in the processing sector is a little less encouraging.

When the quayside prices that are paid by processors are high, they cannot always be passed on to customers. There are particular difficulties for businesses that are tied into larger supermarket chains. The typical contract does not allow for price flexibility. When quay prices rise, the supermarket still expects its product at the stipulated price, regardless of market conditions. I hope that, in the

not too distant future, we will be able to have a full debate in the House about the serious effects that our large supermarket chains are having on the food industry.

The industry has only recently gone through difficult adjustments to the new hygiene regulations. Most of the larger companies were able to make the necessary investments, but many of the smaller operators fell out of the industry. The new hygiene standards are good for the industry because they help to improve the quality of the product, but the transition has been painful for many. A number of other European directives, all introduced by the previous Government, are in the process of being implemented by the industry. They include the packaging directive and the directive dealing with veterinary charges.

One of the most pressing problems that has been brought to me recently is the waste water regulation and the impact that it will have on the industry. Again, it is the result of the implementation of a European directive. We can all support the principle of polluter pays, but the problem for high-volume water users, such as the fish processing industry, is that, in a short time, they will face large increases in water charges.

I met my local water authority last week. It is still in public hands and it is taking a sympathetic approach to the industry. It said that there are 82 users in the industry with water accounts over £5,000 a year. They are facing increases in their charges of almost 24 times what they pay now, depending on the strength and volume of their effluent. That is a serious problem for a relatively poor industry. I hope that the Minister will be able to say something about how he expects the industry to face those charges.

I have raised several issues and I have cantered through my contribution because I am mindful of the fact that other hon. Members want to speak. I want to tell my hon Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, and Lord Sewel, that it is widely recognised, certainly in my fishing community, that they have done a tremendous amount of work in taking the fishing industry forward. There is more stability in the industry; it now has a future; and I congratulate them both on what they have done.

8.57 pm

Mr. Andrew George (St. Ives): I beg to move, as an amendment to the motion, at the end to add:

"recalls that the previous Government added to the burden of UK fishing communities, missed crucial opportunities to develop and enhance the industry, failed to take decisive action to reduce the loss of British fish quota to "flag of convenience" vessels and brought forward Spanish access to western waters by six years; welcomes the forthcoming reform of the Common Fisheries Policy as an opportunity to establish a decentralised system based on the regional management of fisheries which should aim to reduce the needs for discards and improve the accuracy of the scientific base for decision making, ensure equality of monitoring and enforcement across the EU, protect the six and 12 mile fishing limits and develop a policy to encourage low-impact and sustainable fishing methods; and recognises that the fishing industry should continue to be exempt from the EU Working Time Directive."

It is surprising that there is no amendment from Her Majesty's Official Opposition. However, listening to the 42 minutes of entertainment and lack of any policy content from the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), I can see why there is no amendment. It is clear that the Opposition have signed up as members of the Flat Earth Society.

In an attempt politely to compliment the Minister, I once said that he had done better than the Ministers responsible for fishing in the previous Government. I then realised that it was a little like damning him with faint praise. Merely having "done better" would imply that he had perhaps fallen asleep on the job or had been plotting the industry's downfall.

I am not here to praise the Minister, because he has no room for complacency. I discovered that earlier this year when I accompanied him on a visit to fishermen from Newlyn in my constituency. He was not pelted with paint, flour or fish guts or threatened with being barricaded in the fishermen's mission; he was merely shouted at and harangued and told precisely where to stick his fishing policy. He could easily misconstrue that as a Cornish fishing port's equivalent of a ringing endorsement. It is true that their response was a little muted on that occasion, but I think that they were giving the Minister the benefit of the doubt on his first official visit.

In the few minutes that I have—I want as many Back Benchers to contribute as possible—I wish to deal with quota setting, the meeting later this week, the reform of the common fisheries policy, sustainable fishing methods, the working time directive and the problems of meeting compliance costs in the industry.

If we are to spend £36 million on fisheries research, equivalent to about 7 per cent. of the value of UK fish landed, we have a right to expect something better for our money. Fisheries stock research is still an imprecise science and appears unable to help—or is restrained from helping—politicians, Ministers and the industry to plan the stock management over the medium term, say a five-year period. Having failed to take advice gradually to introduce a precautionary approach to the setting of total allowable catches in previous years, we are now faced with the prospect of draconian cuts in 1999.

The Liberal Democrats favour the early introduction of a precautionary approach to the setting of quotas. If the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds—which was mentioned earlier in the debate—is right in its pre-debate briefing that TACs have become a "target for brinkmanship", we must have a cushion allowing for a reasonable margin of error if we are to avoid falling off the precipice, as the Canadian fishing industry has done in the Grand Banks. We do not want that to happen here. Although some information clearly requires verification, greater evidence that the experience of fishermen is being heeded would be reassuring.

As has been mentioned in the debate, there have been examples in area VII of fishermen reporting increased abundance of a particular stock long before that increase has been acknowledged by scientists. In area VII, in 1994-95, fisherman reported greatly increased numbers of both anglers and haddock. However, it took scientists two years to recognise that fishermen were right about the increases. A closer working relationship between fishermen and scientists must be encouraged so that some trust and co-operation, rather than confrontation, is achieved.

I urge the Minister to leave this debate and to go to the Council of Ministers with two arguments ringing in his ears. The first is that, although we should agree the introduction of a more precautionary approach in setting future TACs, the new approach should be introduced gradually and in phases, so that the industry will have the

[Mr. Andrew George]

opportunity to plan and to adjust to it. If, like me, the Minister wants the industry to retain respect for the precautionary approach, he will surely appreciate that it is unlikely that that respect will be won if the quota restriction is implemented in a draconian style.

If the Minister can win an agreement stating that introduction of the precautionary approach should be phased in over three years, for example, I would be prepared to offer my support for it. I am sure that the industry's constructive and sensible representatives would do the same.

The second argument is that we have to secure a clearer foundation for future years' indicative quota. The multi-annual quota has already been mentioned in the debate. The quotas issue will have to be readdressed. The Minister will know that scientists' assessment takes account of species' age profile and recruitment into stock. It is surely not beyond the bounds of possibility to provide the industry with a report on the future indicative quota for particular species in a given area.

An earlier resolution of the subsequent year's fishing quota would also be appreciated, so that fishermen plan and invest at least two years ahead—not just two weeks ahead, which is all that they can do at this time of year.

On the future of the common fisheries policy post-2002, the Minister well knows that the Liberal Democrats' clear policy, which was adopted in 1986, is to create a decentralised regional framework for management of EU fisheries. As the arguments in favour of such a framework have been well rehearsed, I shall not make them again today. However, it is worth noting not only that there are encouraging signs that the United Kingdom industry is enthusiastic about a more decentralised approach but that much of the recent debate—including the Minister's comments earlier today—and comments by EU officials seem to endorse the framework's basic message, which we must drive home. It would be helpful if the Minister outlined how he believes the debate will proceed in coming weeks and months.

While the matter is being negotiated, it would be appreciated if some of the detailed keys of relative stability were revisited. One of many classic legacies of the Tories' 1983 negotiations, which were mentioned by the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), has been the remarkably poor share allocated to UK vessels in area VII. Cod—which has been mentioned in the debate—is an outstanding case of that, and has probably been one of the biggest sources of complaint among Cornish and south-western fishermen.

Cod are ubiquitous in much of area VII fisheries and—as the fisheries are very mixed—are practically impossible to avoid. Consequently, the discard rate of mature fish is unacceptably high. The UK share of quota for cod in area VIIk is about 8 to 9 per cent., whereas the French have 75 per cent. of the quota. Such anomalies must be revisited and renegotiated.

Part of the problem with fisheries management is that it is based entirely on tight regulation and negative influences, such as restrictions, quotas, restricted landing times and effort control. However, there should now be opportunities for policy makers to employ not only the stick but the carrot. Promotion of sustainable fisheries by lifting quota restrictions and providing other encouragements would be a good example of that. The Marine Stewardship Council is championing new approaches towards that and the definition of sustainable fishing methods.

One clear candidate—the Minister is well aware of it, as I have raised the matter with him previously—is mackerel handlining. The Cornish mackerel handline fleet can provide a living for 100 men and their families at this time of year. I am grateful to the Minister for helping to extend the quota for 1998; I am also grateful to the staff at MAFF for their help. However, we could do a great deal more.

A Scottish purse seiner can catch the equivalent of the total quota for the Cornish and south-western handliners in one week—about 1,800 tonnes. It means employment for no more than 10 men for a week. The same amount of fish would provide employment for 100 men for more than three months under the handlining method in Cornwall. Handlining is artisanal and has a low impact on stock, so it should be encouraged. The establishment of an EU-wide policy that would take handliners and similar fishing methods out of the quota system would send the right message to the industry. The Minister should be seen to be leading the fight for that in Europe.

On a connected issue, I should be grateful for the Minister's assurance that the mackerel box will be retained. He is aware that it may come under commercial pressure in the near future, and his support would be very much appreciated.

The working time directive—I appreciate that the Minister has said that it is a Department of Trade and Industry matter, but it still affects the fishing fleet—is a classic case of trying to fit a very round peg into a very square hole. Quite frankly, the concept is absurd. Fishermen cannot down tools and go home in the middle of a week-long fishing operation 200 miles off the Cornish coast.

It is not simply an issue about working hours. Even if fishermen opt out—which they would do in my area—they could still lose their share fishermen status with both the Inland Revenue and the Benefits Agency, thus leaving them worse off. The directive is supposed to protect workers, not undermine them, yet that is what it will do if such a crass idea is implemented.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the costs of safety and monitoring. I have already raised with the Minister responsible for shipping a large number of points about safety and I welcome the consultation paper on the subject which was circulated in the summer. I have welcomed the prospect of the increasing use of more sophisticated but potentially more efficient methods of monitoring, such as the gradual introduction of satellite surveillance for larger vessels, to which the Minister referred. However, the proposed improvements fall heavily on the industry.

I urge the Minister to recognise that Government money invested in safety now is money saved in search and rescue and in accident investigation later—quite apart from the immeasurable cost of human lives lost in what is the most hazardous of all industries. Indeed, it has had two of the worst years for accidents and loss of life for a very long time.

9.8 pm

Mrs. Joan Humble (Blackpool, North and Fleetwood): Yesterday, I received a Christmas card saying "Christmas Greetings from Fleetwood." Father Christmas visited the Fleetwood fish auction. Those for whom I speak in the fishing industry in Fleetwood would prefer my hon. Friend the Minister to dress up as Santa Claus rather than as Scrooge. I hope that that will be the message from today's debate.

I can tell the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) that, when the Minister visited Fleetwood, he obviously received a warmer welcome from my constituents than he did from the hon. Gentleman's constituents when he visited St. Ives. That is possibly because, when he visited the Fleetwood fish auction at the crack of dawn, he was able to recognise all the different species laid out in front of him and so scored 10 out of 10. I hope that after today's debate he will continue to score 10 out of 10.

Fleetwood has a long tradition as a fishing port. Although 1998 has been a difficult year—largely because of the weather—that is set in the context of a much improved climate of opinion, never mind the weather. There is now an optimism that did not exist two or three years ago. It is vital for my constituents—and, indeed, those in other areas—that the Government get the best deal they can on Thursday. I welcome much that my hon. Friend the Minister said.

I do, however, want to refer to one or two specific issues. Before I deal with quotas, let me say something about the designated landing ports scheme. I am pleased to learn that Fleetwood has been confirmed as a designated port, but there is continued unhappiness about the specified landing times. I hope that the Government will reconsider.

As my hon. Friend the Minister will recall, I raised with him earlier the fact that the scheme, as originally proposed, seemed to apply only to British flagships. I understand, however, that following the October meeting of the Fisheries Council, which he attended, he has persuaded his colleagues that vessels from other European Union countries should also be required to follow the new rules. If that is indeed the case, I applaud his efforts, because the original arrangements have been a cause of concern in Fleetwood.

The introduction of the fixed quota allocations to which my hon. Friend the Minister referred will help Fleetwood and its fish producing organisation, certainly in the long term; but it was disappointing that the reference period for the FQA system could not be extended to reflect a more realistic picture of the fishing effort in Fleetwood. It seems to have coincided with a time when, for a variety of reasons, catches were lower than the typical level. Nevertheless, our fishermen and the industry generally welcome the system, which will lead to more effective quota management.

My hon. Friend the Minister will know of the speculation in the industry that FQAs may lead to individual transferable quotas. Other hon. Members have expressed anxiety about the possibility that large operators will buy up the quota of smaller operators, which is clearly undesirable. Concern has been expressed to me that speculators may buy quota and lease it to the highest bidder. People with no connection with catching fish could, with sufficient funds at their disposal, corner a proportion of the market and then price quota leases beyond the economic reach of vessel operators in need of the additional quota.

A letter from the Minister appeared in *Fishing News* on 4 December, a couple of weeks ago. Hon. Members may recall that, during the previous week, a letter had appeared from Mark Hamer, who, representing Fleetwood's fishermen, had expressed concern about remarks that seemed to clarify the financial basis of deals involving purchasing track record and quota units. I was pleased by reassurances given in the last paragraph of my hon. Friend's letter, in which he said—reassuring Mr. Hamer in particular—

"although the issue of fisheries licences is a matter for the fisheries departments, it is recognised that the industry has invested heavily in the acquisition of track record. Local initiatives to support the viability of ports within the framework of our quota management arrangements are to be welcomed and I have no plans to disturb these."

That is especially welcome to me, and to Fleetwood.

Mr. Gill: Is the hon. Lady aware that the same Minister has said that he cannot give assurances to anyone who buys quota? Does she share my concern about the fact that that undermines the Minister's assurance—given to the House again this evening—that relative stability will continue?

Mrs. Humble: The letter that I have quoted seeks to clarify that very point. It is especially important in Fleetwood. My local council, Wyre borough council, Associated British Ports, and our local training and enterprise council, Lancashire West TEC, have offered a loan to our fish producers' organisation to help it to acquire more track record or quota units. Obviously, if it wants to proceed along those lines, it will need an assurance from the Government that such action is viable. That is why I referred to the assurances in the Minister's letter.

We need to distinguish between speculation by financial entrepreneurs who may have no links with the fishing industry, and local initiatives in which entire communities work together to support the fishing industry, as happens in Fleetwood. I urge the Minister to safeguard against the former and encourage the latter.

In the context of the Government's intention to negotiate the best possible fishing opportunities for our fleet, I repeat the point that was made about our aging fleet. Of the 24 vessels in the Fleetwood FPO, only one is less than 20 years old. That is another issue that needs to be addressed.

I listened carefully to the Minister's speech, and I welcome the wide variety of grants that the Government have made available for health and safety and developing port facilities. He will recall from his recent visit to Fleetwood that that was a serious concern among local fishermen. They want to modernise their vessels in order to compete with other European countries. We know that the UK is ineligible for EU grants because the previous Government failed to meet the fleet reduction targets under MAGP III—the multi-annual guidance programme. Nevertheless, it is frustrating for our fishing industry.

In his forthcoming meeting with representatives of the fishing industry, therefore, will the Minister look at solutions that are not only imaginative but viable, as we

[Mrs. Humble]

need to convince fishermen that they can afford to undertake necessary improvements and that the Government will offer whatever support they can?

Given the time, I must rush through my speech. In Fleetwood there are encouraging signs that younger people are returning to the industry. For example, the local college is pursuing a variety of new training courses ranging from the techniques of fish filleting to NVQ level 4 in fishing vessel operation. That is a sign that people have some optimism and hope for the future, and we need to build on that.

Turning to quotas, there clearly needs to be a balance between the preservation of future fish stocks and the current livelihoods of our fishermen. Scientists have painted a bleak picture of existing stock levels—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order.

9.18 pm

Mr. John Townend (East Yorkshire): I have always found the annual debate on fishing and the review of the CFP rather depressing. I cannot remember a year under any Government when a Minister has been able to stand up and say that the CFP is a great success. Indeed, when we consider the criteria on which the CFP should be judged—whether stocks and quotas are increasing; whether conservation is improving; whether the British fishing industry is prosperous and expanding—the answer always seems to be no. Regrettably, this year is no different. Quotas have been cut again.

The North sea is the main area of concern for the Bridlington fishermen whom I represent. The major species fished is cod, so a 6 per cent. cut in the quota will have serious financial implications for the fleet. I suggest that the cut is unnecessary because, about three months ago, it was reported by people who know that the cod stocks have moved in great numbers out of the Barents sea and migrated into the southern North sea and the Grand Banks. Cuts of 23 and 27 per cent. for haddock and whiting show the extent of the failure of the quota system to deliver the goods.

We have heard tonight about the tens of thousands of discards that are put back into the sea. Only idiots could support such a policy, but that is the sort of madness that comes out of Europe month on month. I mentioned that the Norwegians have a fishing policy under which it is illegal to discard. Our Government have taken the madness further by appointing more inspectors to ensure that fish in excess of quota are not brought ashore, but destroyed by being thrown back into the sea. What stupidity, when half the world is starving.

Juveniles are being killed because net sizes are still too small. Rather than make net sizes larger to ensure that more young fish escape, the Government have acquiesced in the harmonisation of net sizes downwards for hake, plaice and megrim. We should note that the harmonisation is to European standards, not to ours.

As a result of industrial fishing, 1 million tonnes of sandeels and pout, which are the basis of the marine food chain, are caught. Despite their promises, the Government have done nothing to stop that wasteful practice—they are all talk, all spin and no do.

I shall not go into the history of quota hopping, except to say that the Government did not take the strong line at Amsterdam that the Conservatives would have taken. This Government are responsible for the level of quota hopping. Quota hoppers now make up 25 per cent. of the tonnage and they take 46 per cent. of the hake quota and 44 per cent. of the plaice quota. All that we got for that was an exchange of letters with Jacques Santer, which are not worth the paper on which they were written. Quota hopping has not delivered any benefit of substance. The Prime Minister is again all talk, all spin and no do.

I shall deal now with the state of the industry. As a result of the activities of the EU and the Labour Government, regulatory costs have soared out of control. The National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations has cited 10 examples of that. I have not time to go through them in detail, but they include costs for satellite monitoring, hygiene inspection costs, tonnage measurement, which can be as much as £2,000 per boat, the western waters reporting, light dues, which are paid by only the British and the Greeks, the general marine distress signal system, EU health and safety directives, the increased fish vessel survey fees—a rate of £70 an hour is excessive—the under-12 m safety code, and the working time directive. When the dust settles, the Government will be held responsible for imposing the working time directive on the fishing industry; by accepting the social chapter, they enabled Europe to impose it on us.

As has been said, the average age of the fleet is more than 25 years. That has implications both for safety and for the industry's prosperity. We have heard that the industry has not been eligible for European grants. The previous Government bear some responsibility for that, but so too do this Government. We also heard today how low the industry is in the list of the Government's priorities. They are not prepared to pay taxpayers' money on building grants or to have a scrap-and-build policy. It is funny that, when the chairman of BMW wants £100 million, taxpayers' money can be found for him. Fishing is a low priority.

The industry's aging fleet has to compete with modern EU fleets that are partly paid for by EU funds and our taxpayers. As in so many cases involving Europe, our people are not on a level playing field. The industry has been reduced in size by quota hopping. It is slowly being squeezed by the EU, so that, by 2002, there will be no British industry, only a European industry that is run from Brussels. The CFP is not about sensible fish management: it is about European integration. We will have European fish, European waters and a European industry.

Is there a solution? I believe that there is, but that it has to be radical. I suggest that we look at the industries in Norway and in Iceland. I was delighted by the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), which was the first positive speech we have heard from a Tory fishing spokesman—perhaps we shall now get a decent Tory policy.

We must go back to square one. We should follow the policy of Save Britain's Fish and leave the CFP, which decimates the food source, legalises the catching and marketing of fish that have not reached breeding size, and leads to thousands of tonnes of prime fish being thrown back into the sea.

We should return the competence of fishing to the House of Commons and reclaim British control of our territorial waters—200 miles or the median line, whichever is the smaller. That would enable us to manage stocks. We could stop driving British fishermen from our waters and perhaps have the most successful fishing industry in the world.

Hon. Members should not forget that Britain is an island, surrounded by what could be some of the most fertile fishing grounds in the world. We cannot be at the heart of Europe and have a prosperous British fishing industry. The Prime Minister said that I and some of my colleagues were headbangers. I suggest that, if he thinks that Europe will allow us to have a prosperous fishing industry or a bigger share of the fish from our own waters, he is the biggest headbanger of all.

9.25 pm

Mr. Austin Mitchell (Great Grimsby): People outside know that it is Christmas because they are beginning to buy turkeys. Members of Parliament who represent fishing ports know it because we are having our annual ritual of empowering a Minister before he goes to negotiate in Brussels. It is a pity that so little time has been left by the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who got off his chest his suppressed feelings of 18 years. In saying the things that he was unable to say during that period, he has filled the time available to other hon. Members. I shall be brief, and I shall make about five basic points.

There is no point in looking at individual quotas, because the Minister has gone over them with the fishing organisations this afternoon. However, I hope that the Minister will try to avoid the wild fluctuations in quotas that have occurred from time to time. Just because the year class for cod in 1997 is down is no reason for the lurching drop of 23 per cent. in cod in the Irish sea and 22 per cent. in area VII. The industry needs stability, and those lurches must be cut out. If the Minister is to make the licence a negotiable instrument with a financial basis, it must guarantee some kind of quota, and some stability in that quota. I hope that he will try to moderate those fluctuations.

The precautionary approach is, in principle, a good idea. It is a good idea to create a buffer zone between the biological limit and the total allowable catch. I am in favour of that, as is the industry. However, bringing it in suddenly, without notice and on a substantial basis—we are looking at a buffer zone of 20 per cent.—is an unreasonable and unfair imposition on the industry. I hope that I am right in saying that the Commission has moderated the proposal, and I hope that the Minister will try to moderate it further. It is right in principle, but not tout d'un coup.

Our aging fleet worries me. The marine accidents investigation branch's report in 1997 showed that 31 vessels were lost, 23 of which were more than 25 years old and three of which were more than 30 years old. There is a safety hazard—it is not only a competitive problem. France and Spain, in particular, have been able to modernise their fleets with European grants that have not been available to our industry. Consequently, we have an aging fleet, and there is more of a risk to our fishermen. We are less competitive and more risky as a fleet.

It is important to draw down European money, if it is available. I understand that funding is not available because we have not achieved our MAGP III targets. However, surely we can meet the intermediate targets with effort control, and therefore funds could be available on a sectoral basis. I know that we will have to pay more as a national contribution because of the Fontainebleau agreement, and I know that the Treasury will oppose that. However, it is unacceptable to object to the proposal when safety is at stake and the lives of fishermen are at risk. The fleet needs modernising, and something must be done. It is no good just trotting out the Treasury arguments.

Is European funding available? If it is, we can apply our argument to the Treasury to get some recognition of the need to modernise and to keep the British fleet as up to date as we can. Thanks to the delay in decommissioning by the previous Government, we have a real problem with our aging fleet.

With the industry in its present state, it is wrong to impose extra charges in the way envisaged. Extra charges are coming from all directions—no one is supervising the process, or protecting the interests of the industry in the way that I hope the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will. Charges are coming from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions, and from the Department of Trade and Industry. Compliance costs are increasing, and those costs are not being imposed on our competitors in the same way. Light dues were introduced by the previous Government, and are not paid by anyone else. In addition, the cost of satellite monitoring is paid for out of European funding for other nations. There are also hygiene inspection costs; tonnage measurements, which will cost up to £2,000 a vessel; increased survey fees; and, hanging over it all, the threat of the working time directive, which will impose massive costs. I do not think that it will even be possible to enforce it in the industry, but it will be a huge burden.

The industry cannot afford all those charges, and needs to be protected. Charges should certainly be no higher than those imposed on our European competitors. There is a problem with charges on the processing sector. In Grimsby, we are about to lose 500 fish processing jobs. The Minister is well aware of the situation. There has been such an escalation in the price of fish in world markets—everyone is competing to get fish—that the charge to the consumer has had to be increased, so the consumer bought 9 per cent. less fish in the most recent quarter.

The industry is in real difficulties, and it is wrong to impose so many charges. The waste water charge will be crippling for merchants, and the sanitary inspection charges, at each stage of processing, will be a real burden for the processing sector. There is too much bureaucratic inertia in the system.

With the industry and the processing side facing such problems, it is unfair, unreasonable and wrong to impose such charges. Having said that, I express my confidence in the Minister, who has worked hard to understand the industry. He has listened to it and consulted it far more effectively than any other Minister. I am confident that he will fight for what is right for the industry. I wish him more power to his elbow.

Mr. Steen: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. My constituency has the largest beam trawler fleet in Britain and the largest crabbing fleet. My constituents will not understand why, for the second year running, I have been unable to attract the attention of the Chair. I

[Mr. Steen]

understand that, on this occasion, it is because Front Benchers took longer than expected. I wonder whether, when Back Benchers are allowed only 10 minutes to speak, Front Benchers could also be confined to perhaps 15 or 20 minutes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that I have a great deal of sympathy for him. I have made it known to both the Minister and the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls) that the Chair would expect Back Benchers to be given due consideration in future in a debate such as this. It is unfair for Back Benchers to come in with their cases prepared on behalf of their constituents and be so disappointed. I am glad to be able to put that matter on the record.

9.33 pm

Mr. Alex Salmond (Banff and Buchan): I applaud your remarks, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and I have great sympathy for the hon. Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) and other hon. Members who will be unable to speak. I have attended this debate for the past 12 years, and I have seen this situation occurring many times. I was rather hoping that the new Fisheries Minister, as he complained about the matter so many times in opposition, would ensure, with his colleagues, that we had adequate time for fishing interests to be represented. Not one Northern Ireland Member has had the chance to put his case, and I am the first Scottish Member to do so.

This is a valedictory performance for Scottish Members, as we are about to move to the Scottish Parliament, and I am certain that, whatever else it does, that Parliament will allow us more time than the House has done to debate the huge and major industry of fishing.

In January 1997, the Foreign Secretary promised at the Scottish Grand Committee in Edinburgh that a Scottish Minister could lead the delegation in the European negotiations. Given the preponderance of the Scottish fleet in value and landings and its majority in tonnage, I should have thought that fisheries were a highly appropriate matter on which to live up to that promise. I hope that the Minister will answer that point.

I was struck, when listening to the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), by the memory of that great story about Harold Wilson in Devonport. He asked, "Why do I say that the Royal Navy is the premier service?", and a heckler shouted, "Because you are in Devonport." Why does the Conservative party call for the national repatriation of fisheries? Because they are in opposition. I have attended these debates for the past 12 years and many other hon. Members have done so for even longer, but that departure from what the Conservative party said in government almost beggars belief.

It is true that, within the framework of the European Union, a determined country with a closely defined set of objectives can achieve great things for a particular subject matter, and that is what Spain has done with fisheries and with regional policy. However, the evidence of the Conservative party's 18 years in government was that, far from being the prime objective of European policy, fishing was one of the bargaining counters that was traded away to achieve other objectives. Spain achieved early access to western waters because that was negotiated away by the Conservative Government as part of their overall approach to European policy. The Conservative party must hope that fishermen have short memories, but I suspect that they will not be short enough for the political purposes of Conservative Front Benchers.

I wish to address two serious points to the Fisheries Minister. In opposition, he said that the hallmarks of his approach to fisheries policy would be consultation with the industry and parity with other fishing fleets in Europe. He said that he would not tolerate a situation in which the fishing fleet of this country was placed at a competitive disadvantage to other European fleets. We have had fly-by-night Fisheries Ministers in the past, and the Minister is certainly not one of those, because he has been involved in the issue, in opposition and in government, for most of the 12 years that I have participated in fisheries debates. Even though we had fly-by-night Tory Ministers, they still managed to outstay their welcomes.

I wish to press the Minister gently on those areas in which he has departed from the admirable objectives that he put forward in opposition. We had an historic event in fisheries policy earlier this year when the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the National Federation of Fishing Organisations, the two major bodies representing the industry, met and put together a document—which hugely impressed many hon. Members who represent fishing interests—on the zonal management approach to the new fisheries policy emerging in Europe.

Therefore, I was disappointed that the fishing representatives described the Government's approach to that document as "somewhat non-committal". The Minister lost the opportunity presented by that fine document and the six months of the United Kingdom presidency of the European Union. I notice that the list of achievements did not get to the heart of the key areas of fisheries policy. When the Under-Secretary winds up, I hope that he will commit the Government to many of the excellent principles of the zonal management approach.

The Minister briefly alluded to the licence working group. My understanding is that three decisions on licences have been made almost without reference to the licence working group and, in one case, in direct opposition to its declaration of fisheries interests. I refer to the allocation of freezer trawlers to licences based on white fish licences. That was fiercely opposed by the licence working group, but went ahead by ministerial edict.

Given that the freezer trawlers south of the border are all flagships, someone in the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food must carry a torch for them. Otherwise, it is inexplicable that the licence working group should be consulted by the Minister, yet he makes decisions that are not favoured by the industry. I gently suggest to the Minister that the commitments that he made to a consultative approach have not always been fulfilled, and that civil servants seem to make decisions without always referring them to the Minister.

I associate myself with the remarks made about parity by the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell). The Minister must make the connection between the aging nature of the fleet and incidents at sea. The safety record has deteriorated. There are many reasons why fishing boats are lost, and we cannot necessarily put our finger on one particular cause. However, it follows that an aging

fleet will be more dangerous, and the Minister must make that connection. His remarks about the loss of men from Iona and elsewhere are much appreciated by the industry, but there is an inherent connection between the age and structure of a fleet and the safety record of the industry. It was as a result of parity questions that European fleets received investment over the past 10 years—a point to which the Minister must address himself if he is to live up to the claims he made when he was in opposition.

Let me offer one more example where parity does not exist. The boats of our pelagic fleet operate in Atlantic waters on restrictive licences. They need a licence for each species, but other pelagic boats do not face that problem. When he was in opposition, the Minister said that he would make sure that our fishermen did not operate at a disadvantage to other fleets. If he is to live up to those words, he must examine areas such as that.

Mr. Morley *indicated assent.*

Mr. Salmond: I am glad to see the Minister nod his assent to that point.

In the interests of brevity, I shall make four quick references to points that the Under–Secretary of State for Scotland might mention in his summing up. There is a serious danger that the decline in the quota for North sea haddock will re-ignite the problem that the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran) rightly said had been almost eradicated—discards and the black fish. If we press too hard on North sea haddock, particularly on the precautionary principle, there is a danger of the re-emergence of that problem, which we have worked hard to eliminate. Can the Minister tell us whether he will invoke the Hague preference to its full extent so that we can at least get some compensation in relation to the North sea haddock allocation?

Secondly, the Minister may wish to enlarge on points made about the working time directive. The Parliamentary Secretary spoke reassuringly on those points earlier.

Thirdly, the pelagic fleet has commissioned an excellent report by the Marine Resources Assessment Group, which I read today. Will both Ministers read the report carefully as it makes some excellent points about capacity in the pelagic industry? It is worth careful study.

Finally, I echo the point made by the hon. Member for Aberdeen, Central about the damage that water charges could do to the economically fragile processing industry.

I have been as brief as possible under the circumstances, but let me close with one last remark. I look forward to having adequate parliamentary time for debates on fishing policy and the fishing industry in the Scottish Parliament, and I hope that we can pursue those discussions through direct access to the leadership of the fisheries delegation on the Council of Ministers. Perhaps the Under-Secretary will refer to that point in his closing remarks.

9.42 pm

Dr. Liam Fox (Woodspring): I hope that both Ministers will note the number of hon. Members who have been unable to speak, and that we shall be allowed a longer time for a future debate.

We must ask why we have the annual debate on total allowable catches. There are two reasons. First, we require conservation of a vital national resource. Secondly, we require an economically viable fishing industry. Several questions must therefore be asked annually: how do we achieve those two objectives; what are the current problems of the common fisheries policy; what improvements are necessary, and how can they be made; what is the least we will accept; and what can we do if we cannot achieve that minimum?

Conservation is the first point to consider. The Parliamentary Secretary was quite right to say that conservation is dependent on scientific advice. He said that the precautionary approach was hard to fault in principle, and we agree with that. There are costs, however. That approach may mean that more fish are dumped at sea, and it may be anti-conservationist, as the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan (Mr. Salmond) said. Under current policy, the dumping of prime fish continues apace, which is killing fish unnecessarily and polluting the sea bed. Worse still, further reductions in the already proposed minimum landing sizes—to below the size at which fish can breed—must have a dramatic effect on conservation. The policy is failing in one of its main aims.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend) raised industrial fishing, an issue that I am sure many other hon. Members would have brought up had they been able to speak. The latest TAC of 1 million tonnes for sandeels and pout gives only 5 per cent. to the United Kingdom, but it is the base of the marine food chain. Can the Under–Secretary of State for Scotland tell us how how that will be controlled, as it is vital to conservation?

Many hon. Members, including the hon. Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), mentioned the aging fleet. We heard that money needed to be made available to help. The Government's defence is that other EU countries get access to money because they have met their multi-annual guidance programme requirements, but the Government know that they question the Commission's reliability on estimates of compliance as much as we did. Do they intend repeatedly to challenge the Commission's estimates and what is to be done about them?

In agriculture, we have seen the Government's unwillingness to claim agrimonetary compensation, yet the United Kingdom is substantially behind France, Spain, Italy and Portugal as a recipient of the financial instrument of fisheries grant—FIFG. It is a question of priorities. The Treasury line is that 71p out of every pound has to come from the Treasury, which I have always thought of as a bizarre way of saying that one gets 30 per cent. back for everything that one spends on a particular programme. It depends whether one is the Treasury, trying to withhold the money, or the Departments, which want it. The Minister said that the money available would not be best used to modernise the fishing fleet, yet our European partners, who get that money, are also our competitors. We must bear that in mind if our fishing industry is to remain viable.

I hope that the Minister will take up the safety argument in his response, and deal with the modernisation of an aging fleet. The National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations has said:

"Regrettably, the Government's approach to the issue so far has combined a sanctimonious high moral tone with a failure to focus on the age of the fleet as a central factor in the high casualty rate."

[Dr. Liam Fox]

I hope that the Government will tackle that.

On quota hoppers, my hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire made some powerful points. They make up only 2 per cent. of the fleet but, because the boats are typically more powerful and larger, they account for perhaps one quarter of the total national tonnage.

After the ridiculous throwing out of the Merchant Shipping Act 1998, which was overturned by the European Court of Justice, we were left with the Government's agreement with Jacques Santer, which is utterly meaningless in effect because quota hoppers need meet only one of the following criteria. At least 50 per cent. of the quota, by weight, must be landed in the UK, but that allows for fish to be landed and immediately placed on refrigerated lorries for transport abroad. Normally, 50 per cent. of the crew would be resident in a UK coastal area, but the definition could be said to omit klondikers from associated vessels—I look forward to hearing the Minister's views on that—while residency itself remains unsatisfactorily defined. Therefore, many fishermen could still effectively be resident abroad.

Another criterion is that the owner would incur

"a given level of operating expenditure"

in UK coastal areas for goods and services, but that ignores the reality, which is that some quota hoppers also own, or are associated with, food processing companies. Those are the real impacts of what was agreed. The policy has not created jobs or solved the problem.

I am sorry that my hon. Friend the Member for Totnes (Mr. Steen) could not speak in the debate, as he would have loved to say a few things about compliance costs, which are ever growing. The NFFO has said:

"the ever growing battery of regulations to which the fishing industry is subject, are now spiralling out of control, posing a threat to vessels whose viability is marginal and imposing a massive burden on the industry as a whole. There appears to be no sensitivity within Government to this or even any attempt at an overview of the costs imposed by different departments."

The hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) said how much he appreciated satellite monitoring, but the UK declines to part-fund it for all vessels over 24 m in length, thereby blocking the EU side of the grant. Our industry is being put at a disadvantage to its competitors.

My hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire mentioned tonnage measurements. There again, extra costs are being imposed on the industry, and for what? Perhaps worst of all is the working time directive. Including the industry in it would ignore the factors that are specific to fishing. It is seasonal and entirely dependent on the weather. Furthermore, share fishing, resulting in what one might call co-operative earnings, makes up a considerable part of the industry. That is better classed as self-employment—if there is no cash, there is no pay.

The Government have opened the floodgates to all those rules by agreeing to the social chapter, and it is simply not good enough for them to attempt to wash their hands of the damage that will ultimately be done to fishing and other industries.

I want to give the Minister reasonable time to reply to the many points raised in the debate, but when the Parliamentary Secretary opened the debate, he painted an optimistic longer-term picture for the industry. What will happen in 2002? The derogation may be renewed, but at what cost? If it has to be done by unanimity, what legal challenges may lie ahead?

We need a firm bottom line for what is too high a price for the British fishing industry to pay within the common fisheries policy, and we need to keep all our options open. It is surely not our position that the maintenance of the architecture of the common fisheries policy is worth paying any price for. If it is, we have abdicated our responsibility and betrayed our fishermen. If it is not, then the job of this House is to put the British interest first. I caution the Minister against using the line that Europe is coming our way—boy, do we know that line.

We must hope that negotiation is successful, but we must be aware of the consequences of failure for the industry. Failure is not an acceptable outcome and we must ensure that, faced with that, we would rule out nothing at all in our response as a British Parliament.

9.50 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr. Calum Macdonald): I am very pleased to wind up the debate this evening. It has ranged widely, and for the most part constructively, across many aspects of fisheries policy. I shall respond to the specific issues raised by hon. Members, but first, I should like to refer to an important point that was made by several hon. Members. Like them, I acknowledge the special nature of the fishing industry which I know well from my constituency. Fishing is a dangerous occupation, and fishermen have often paid a heavy price for reaping the harvest of the sea. We should never lose sight of that.

Indeed, in my constituency during the past weekend, a 28-year-old fishermen, Donald Morrison, was lost in a tragic accident while fishing. I am sure that the whole House will join me in extending sympathy to his family and to the families of others who have lost their lives during the past year.

I shall now turn to some of the points made in the debate. I know that many fishermen believe that they have much to contribute to the management of the stocks, and even to the scientific assessment of the stocks. I know, too, that they are frustrated by the variations in the total allowable catches and quotas. They find it difficult to cope with such variations which disrupt their markets. Undoubtedly, they would like greater stability in the total allowable catches. Many hon. Members made that point, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central (Mr. Doran).

In managing the stocks, we need to take full account of those very justifiable concerns. However, at the same time, we need to take account of the scientific evidence about fish stocks and their future viability. We cannot just ignore that evidence, no matter how disappointing it might be for a particular stock in a particular year.

I can assure the House that the Government will do all we can in the negotiations ahead to get the best possible deal for British fishermen consistent with long-term sustainability of fishing stocks. We shall not hesitate to invoke the Hague preference, when that would be in the interests of the industry. However, we must also ensure

that, once the Fisheries Council has decided the TACs and the quotas—which it will do with regard both to the scientific advice, which is important, and to the wider economic implications—they are respected in practice by all fishermen.

It would be appropriate to say something about devolution, given the significance of the debate as we are about to enter a new era for fisheries management within the United Kingdom. In previous debates, some hon. Members expressed the view that devolution will mean that Scotland will lose its voice in fisheries management, especially at the European level. Others fear that the Scottish Parliament will fail to respect UK obligations or, in pursuing the interests of Scottish fishermen, will discriminate against fishermen from other parts of the UK. I am sure that both those anxieties will prove to be unfounded. Devolution will help us to deliver local solutions to local problems across the United Kingdom.

Mr. Salmond: Will a Scottish Fisheries Minister in the Scottish Parliament be able to lead a United Kingdom delegation to the Fisheries Council, as the Foreign Secretary suggested when he was in Edinburgh last January?

Mr. Macdonald: I assure hon. Members that Scottish Ministers will continue to be able to attend Fisheries Council meetings as part of the United Kingdom team. There is no reason why they cannot lead delegations, as appropriate. They can do that now, and the position remains unchanged.

Mr. John D. Taylor (Strangford): Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Macdonald: I had better not, as I have further points to make.

My hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen, Central referred to important matters that affect the wider industry, particularly the processing sector. The industry has expressed concern about increased water charges in my hon. Friend's constituency and elsewhere in the area. It is important to note that other parts of the United Kingdom have faced similar increases. The North of Scotland water authority is in discussions with industry representatives, and I hope that it will be able to clarify the options for the industry. I understand also that the Sea Fish Industry Authority is consulting the industry about practical ideas for reducing the volume of waste, which is the best way of tackling that problem in the long term.

Several hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell), referred to the safety of old boats and the need for investment in new boats. The industry is concerned about the safety of older fishing boats, and my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary addressed that issue squarely in his speech. He made it clear that he and the Scottish Fisheries Minister are prepared to meet industry representatives to discuss practical ways of addressing the issue.

Hon. Members also referred to the provisions of the working time directive and how they apply to fishermen. I stress that the Government are committed to the principles of the directive on health and safety grounds. We believe that they are important. However, the Government have made it clear that any proposals to extend them to sea fishing must take account of the practical and commercial realities of the industry, including the share fishermen system. The Commission's latest proposals show that it is taking those factors into account. Officials from the various Departments concerned will continue to keep in close touch with the industry regarding the proposals.

My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool, North and Fleetwood (Mrs. Humble) called for better enforcement across Europe. She is correct to say that the Government looked for and welcome the improved control measures proposed for adoption later this week at the Fisheries Council meeting in Brussels. Proposed amendments in the regulations provide for, among other things, a number of improvements in control at the point of landing and in relation to the sale and transport of fish. We welcome the European Commission's efforts to encourage co-operation and consistency of enforcement across the Union.

Several hon. Members referred to the precautionary approach. That is a sensible principle. It is the first year in which it has been advanced, and we recognise that more work must be done before we can rely solidly on that new approach.

Perhaps the most striking contribution to tonight's debate was the speech by the hon. Member for Teignbridge (Mr. Nicholls), who opened for the Opposition. He launched a fierce and relentless attack on the past policies of his party in government but, unfortunately, offered no credible alternative to quota management. The problem is not the CFP, but the need to manage limited and finite stocks. We must face that reality, and we shall approach the forthcoming negotiations on that basis.

Mr. Andrew George: I beg to move—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not necessary for the hon. Member for St. Ives (Mr. George) to put the Question, as the House has agreed that the vote will be taken at 10 o'clock.

Mr. Macdonald: I have reached the end of my remarks. I commend the motion to the House.

Question put, That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 50, Noes 340.

Division No. 24] **[10 pm**

AYES

Allan, Richard	Cotter, Brian
Beggs, Roy	Cunningham, Ms Roseanna *(Perth)*
Beith, Rt Hon A J	Ewing, Mrs Margaret
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*	Fearn, Ronnie
Brake, Tom	Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Brand, Dr Peter	George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Breed, Colin	Gorrie, Donald
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*	Hancock, Mike
Burnett, John	Harris, Dr Evan
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*	Harvey, Nick
Chidgey, David	Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
	Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
	Jones, Ieuan Wyn *(Ynys Môn)*

Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kirkwood, Archy
Livsey, Richard
Llwyd, Elfyn
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Moore, Michael
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Oaten, Mark
Opik, Lembit
Rendel, David
Ross, William *(E Londy)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Salmond, Alex
Sanders, Adrian
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Stunell, Andrew
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thompson, William
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Tyler, Paul
Wallace, James
Webb, Steve
Welsh, Andrew

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Edward Davey and
Mr. Phil Willis.

NOES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Bennett, Andrew F
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
Gerrard, Neil
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Home Robertson, John
Hood, Jimmy
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Illsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob
Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
Mclsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Macklnlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malleber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd

Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Robinson, Geoffrey *(Co'try NW)*
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Shaw, Jonathan
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Speller, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Stainberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverhton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Woolas, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Mr. Jim Dowd and
Mr. Robert Ainsworth.

Question accordingly negatived.

Main Question put:—

The House divided: Ayes 377, Noes 129.

Division No. 25] **[10.13 pm**

AYES

Abbott, Ms Diane
Adams, Mrs Irene *(Paisley N)*
Ainger, Nick
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Anderson, Donald *(Swansea E)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Austin, John
Barnes, Harry
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beard, Nigel
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bell, Stuart *(Middlesbrough)*
Benn, Rt Hon Tony
Benton, Joe
Bermingham, Gerald
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Burnett, John
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Cann, Jamie
Caplin, Ivor
Casale, Roger
Caton, Martin
Cawsey, Ian
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clarke, Eric *(Midlothian)*
Clarke, Tony *(Northampton S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cohen, Harry
Coleman, Iain
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunliffe, Lawrence
Cunningham, Jim *(Co'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Edward *(Kingston)*
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Davies, Geraint *(Croydon C)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Dobson, Rt Hon Frank
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Edwards, Huw
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Ennis, Jeff
Etherington, Bill
Fearn, Ronnie
Field, Rt Hon Frank
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galloway, George
Gapes, Mike
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Godman, Dr Norman A
Godsiff, Roger
Goggins, Paul
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hamilton, Fabian *(Leeds NE)*
Hancock, Mike
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Healey, John
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Henderson, Ivan *(Harwich)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Home Robertson, John
Hope, Phil
Hopkins, Kelvin
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howarth, George *(Knowsley N)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hurst, Alan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Ilsley, Eric
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Johnson, Miss Melanie *(Welwyn Hatfield)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Helen *(Warrington N)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Dr Lynne *(Selly Oak)*
Jones, Martyn *(Clwyd S)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Kaufman, Rt Hon Gerald
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Alan *(Feltham & Heston)*
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kemp, Fraser
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Khabra, Piara S
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Laxton, Bob

Lepper, David
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Lewis, Terry *(Worsley)*
Linton, Martin
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAllion, John
McAvoy, Thomas
McCabe, Steve
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McDonnell, John
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
McWilliam, John
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Mandelson, Rt Hon Peter
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Gordon *(Blackpool S)*
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Marshall–Andrews, Robert
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Meacher, Rt Hon Michael
Meale, Alan
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Miller, Andrew
Mitchell, Austin
Moffatt, Laura
Moonie, Dr Lewis
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morley, Elliot
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Olner, Bill
O'Neill, Martin
Öpik, Lembit
Organ, Mrs Diana
Osborne, Ms Sandra
Pearson, Ian
Pendry, Tom
Perham, Ms Linda
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooney, Terry
Ross, Ernie *(Dundee W)*
Ross, William *(E Lond'y)*
Rowlands, Ted
Ruane, Chris
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Sedgemore, Brian
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Miss Geraldine *(Morecambe & Lunesdale)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Smith, Sir Robert *(W Ab'dns)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Snape, Peter
Soley, Clive
Speller, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Starkey, Dr Phyllis
Steinberg, Gerry
Stevenson, George
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Stott, Roger
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Rt Hon John D *(Strangford)*
Temple-Morris, Peter
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Thompson, William
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Truswell, Paul
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr Desmond *(Kemptown)*
Wallace, James
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
Webb, Steve
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Williams, Rt Hon Alan *(Swansea W)*
Williams, Alan W *(E Carmarthen)*
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Wise, Audrey
Wood, Mike
Wooley, Phil
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mr. Robert Ainsworth and Mr. Jim Dowd.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Bercow, John
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Body, Sir Richard
Boswell, Tim
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burns, Simon
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clark, Dr Michael *(Rayleigh)*
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Faber, David
Fallon, Michael
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Gorman, Mrs Teresa
Gray, James
Green, Damian
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Horam, John
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Hunter, Andrew
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Key, Robert
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Leigh, Edward
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lilley, Rt Hon Peter
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
McLoughlin, Patrick
Malins, Humfrey
Maples, John
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Moss, Malcolm
Nicholls, Patrick
Norman, Archie
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Prior, David
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'y)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
St Aubyn, Nick
Sayeed, Jonathan
Shephard, Rt Hon Mrs Gillian
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Streeter, Gary
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*

Taylor, Sir Teddy	Wilkinson, John
Townend, John	Willetts, David
Trend, Michael	Wilshire, David
Tyrie, Andrew	Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Viggers, Peter	Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Wardle, Charles	Yeo, Tim
Waterson, Nigel	Young, Rt Hon Sir George
Wells, Bowen	
Whitney, Sir Raymond	**Tellers for the Noes:**
Whittingdale, John	**Mrs. Caroline Spelman and**
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann	**Sir David Madel.**

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House takes note of European Union Document No. COM(98)680, relating to the fixing of total allowable catches for 1999 and certain conditions under which they may be fished; and supports the Government's intentions to negotiate the best possible fishing opportunities for British fishermen based on sustainable fisheries management, effective enforcement and the need to ensure that regional differences of fisheries are fully recognised.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The Government have been defeated yet again in the other place on the principle of the closed list. This succession of defeats on a policy repeatedly attacked by the Government's own Back Benchers is an unprecedented humiliation for the Government.

Will the Government now state their intentions? Will they reconsider, or do they propose to put on the statute book, using the Parliament Act, a measure that was not in their manifesto and that is an affront to democracy?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair.

Mr. Beith: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Would it not be possible for you to allow the Leader of the House to say whether the repeatedly expressed will of this House that there should be a proportional system will now be given effect by the Parliament Act?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a matter for this evening's business, and therefore it is not a matter for the Chair.

CONSOLIDATED FUND BILL

Order for Second Reading read.

Question, That the Bill be now read a Second time, *put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 56 (Consolidated Fund Bills), and agreed to.*

Question, That the Bill be now read the Third time, *put forthwith, and agreed to.*

Bill accordingly read the Third time, and passed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at the sitting on Wednesday 16th December, proceedings on any Motions in the name of Margaret Beckett relating to modernisation of the House of Commons, sittings of the House or meetings of standing committees may continue, though opposed, until any hour and the Speaker shall put the Questions necessary to dispose of proceedings not later than eight o'clock, or four hours after the commencement of proceedings, whichever is the later, and such Questions shall include the Questions on any Amendments selected by her which may then be moved.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

PETITIONS

Old People's Homes (Essex)

10.27 pm

Mr. Bob Russell (Colchester): I wish to present a petition in the name of my constituent, Mary Blandon, and 600 other residents of Colchester and district opposing the sale of old people's homes by the Conservative-run Essex county council.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents of Colchester and District, Deplores the proposal of Essex County Council to sell 33 of its 36 Old People's Homes, including Greenways, Marylands, Trippier House and Scarletts in Colchester; believe that this will deprive elderly people of a proper choice of accommodation provided by the public and private sectors; are concerned that the disposal will cause anxiety to existing residents and their families; and are dismayed that employees may experience less favourable terms of conditions if the Homes are privatised.

The Petitioners therefore urge the House of Commons to introduce legislation to prevent such mass disposals of Old People's Homes.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Moreton

10.29 pm

Mr. Eric Pickles (Brentwood and Ongar): This petition is presented on behalf of the residents of Moreton, a small village in my constituency much used by television companies to show a rural idyll. It is threatened by a showman's permanent winter quarters, which would destroy the nature of the village. The petition is signed by 214 people out of a total population of 278; therefore, 77 per cent. of the population support the petition.

The petition states:

The Petition of residents and friends of the village of Moreton in the parliamentary constituency of Brentwood and Ongar.

Declare that the imposition of a permanent showman's site at the centre of the village of Moreton on Green Belt land, would increase the population of the village by a third and damage the unique character of Moreton.

The Petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons supports their plea to save both the Green Belt and the character of Moreton.

And the Petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Derbyshire Community Transports

10.30 pm

Judy Mallaber (Amber Valley): I have pleasure in presenting a petition from the Forum of Derbyshire Community Transports, signed by 7,029 Derbyshire residents who use or support the "Community Transport" service in the county. It is also supported by Derbyshire Members of Parliament on a cross-party basis.

[Judy Mallaber]

The petitioners note that commercial passenger transport companies that operate scheduled services are entitled to a rebate of their fuel duty. The rebate is not paid to "Community Transport" services, which last year in Derbyshire made half a million journeys carrying 10,000 elderly or disabled residents with mobility difficulties who were physically unable to use scheduled bus services.

The petition is beautifully inscribed on hand-made locally produced paper. It concludes:

Wherefore your Petitioners pray that your honourable House enact such legislation, or change such legislation as may be necessary to end discrimination by allowing Companies or Organisations operating professional Community Transport type services for persons with mobility difficulties, to reclaim rebate of duties paid on fuel used to provide such services.

To lie upon the Table.

Freight Vehicles (Fuel)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

10.31 pm

Dr. Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test): I am delighted to have been selected to introduce this debate.

Freight vehicles come in all shapes and sizes, but the bulk of them are large trucks carrying goods the length and breadth of the land. Such vehicles do not contribute as much carbon dioxide to the atmosphere as cars, but we know from the recent transport White Paper that they provide a substantial load—some 9 per cent. of total carbon dioxide emissions, against 14 per cent. of the total for cars. They are also far more responsible than car traffic for certain pollutants such as small particles emitted by diesel engines, the preferred power source for most freight vehicles.

The AA recently pointed out that the 500,000 freight vehicles on the road produce more PM_{10}—particulate matter—fine-particle emissions than the 23 million cars that are also sliding about. We also know that they contribute to the increasing congestion on the roads, and to noise pollution, as they make their deliveries in towns. Increasingly tight emission standards—soon to be tightened further—have been laid down by the European Union for exhaust gases issuing from freight vehicles.

The White Paper and the recent Green Paper on climate change set out plans to switch transport by both cars and lorries to other modes. Plans exist substantially to increase the freight carried by rail. Even if all those plans succeeded, however, only a small percentage of road transport would be shifted. At most, a switch to rail and other modes would level out road-hauled freight in the foreseeable future.

As it is likely that the articulated truck will be with us for a long time, we should consider means by which we can make it cleaner and quieter. We need to look at three elements of emissions: carbon dioxide emissions, emissions of noxious gases such as nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide, and the deposit of particulates. Progress is being made with levels of all those emissions, in terms of cleaner engines; but the continued use of petrol or diesel as a fuel means that they will continue to be pumped out in substantial quantities.

What fuels might we look at? A number are potentially on offer, but only two present themselves immediately as realistic alternatives to petrol or diesel. First, we can modify diesel itself. Ultra-low-sulphur diesel will eliminate many particulate emissions, but the process of sulphur removal itself means, according to one petroleum company, that for every tonne of sulphur removed by the processing, 20 tonnes of carbon dioxide are discharged into the atmosphere. Biodiesel looks attractive and has the advantage of being CO_2 neutral—it derives from crops that fix the CO_2 in the first place—but the amount grown per gallon of biodiesel makes it difficult to conceive of serious production in the United Kingdom. There are similar problems with methanol or ethanol, which can also be CO_2 neutral, in terms of crop production compared with the amount of fuel produced. For that reason and others, it is very expensive to produce.

The two candidates most likely to be of practical use currently are LPG—liquefied petroleum gas—and CNG—compressed natural gas. LPG has the advantage of

liquefying at normal temperatures and can be carried in a relatively compact tank. For natural gas to liquefy, a deep-freeze tank is needed; otherwise, the cylinders that contain it are somewhat bulky, and that can limit the range of a vehicle using the gas. LPG is a by-product of the petroleum cracking process, while natural gas is not and it has the advantage of being freely available—literally, via the mains. Natural gas is also essentially methane which can be derived from recycling processes such as organic waste digestion or it can be collected from the organic breakdown of landfill.

Both gases are undoubtedly much cleaner than petrol in all respects and emit virtually no particles, unlike diesel. They emit roughly the same CO_2 as diesel. Although they are not by any means the perfect fuel substitute for petrol or diesel and are mineral fuels, their widespread use in cars and trucks would undoubtedly make a substantial contribution towards the targets that the Government are seeking from our use of vehicles in the United Kingdom. Conversions of petrol engines are relatively cheap, but conversions of diesel engines are substantially more expensive.

The problem for the debate and for the scenario is that virtually no large vehicles in the UK run on either LPG or CNG. Altogether 1.1 million vehicles do so in Italy, as do 400,000 in Holland. The buses in Vienna have run on natural gas for 40 years. In the UK, the estimated total of LPG vehicles—mostly cars—is below 8,000. The number of LPG or CNG freight or large passenger vehicles is so low that they can be identified and marvelled at almost individually. There are 10 in my constituency in the shape of natural gas buses which run quietly and smoothly, emit no exhaust fumes and are very popular with passengers. Safeway runs a small fleet of CNG trucks in London, as does Marks and Spencer. There is a relatively small number of other such vehicles, but that is about it.

There is progress, but it is painfully slow. Powershift, supported by the Energy Saving Trust, has supported the Safeway and Marks and Spencer initiative, and aims to convert 1,000 vehicles, mostly cars, to alternative fuels in 1,000 days. It is exceeding that target. I recently opened a fleet of police cars converted to LPG for the Hampshire constabulary. As I said on the day, I hope that the local criminal fraternity will show equal public awareness by converting a similar number of getaway cars to natural gas. However, there is no disguising the fact that the UK lags behind other countries and that in respect of freight vehicles we hardly register.

To understand why that is so, I spent a day with Boots the Chemists, looking at the national distribution procedures in Nottingham. I also spent time at B and Q headquarters near Southampton, finding out about its distribution procedures. I have spoken to a number of companies and trade federations with an interest in the matter.

I believe that some larger companies at least would like to introduce alternative fuels to their fleets for environmental reasons and because they realise that regulation will move them in that direction. They feel constrained, for example, by curfews on deliveries in towns. Quieter vehicles may help. They certainly worry about meeting new EU emission standards with their current fleets. So why do they not convert? I believe that there are four main reasons.

First, companies are concerned about the instability of the market in the United Kingdom. They are not sure whether there is or will be an industry standard and that, if they invest in new vehicles, those vehicles will have any resale value. They need some view of a long-term future for one or more alternative fuels in the United Kingdom. To put it crudely, the market will be mature when Dodgy Transport Ltd. buys a CNG truck from a company that has, in turn, bought it from Boots when that company has had its use from it.

Secondly, companies see little or no incentive to switch. They are uncertain about the Government's pricing policies on fuels. They know that there is a fuel escalator, but wonder whether their chosen alternative fuel will escalate too and, if so, over what period.

Thirdly, companies see little or no evidence that the infrastructure that will genuinely allow them to run their vehicles over long distances and use them flexibly is coming into existence. The Safeway and Marks and Spencer CNG fleets run, in effect, as rail routes to and from given destinations with fuelling taking place in one location—their home depots.

Boots uses its transport flexibly. It attempts to maintain a high load level by undertaking triangular journeys. After delivering goods, its trucks pick up supplies for the central distribution depot. Other companies, such as B and Q and Tesco, attempt to back-fill—they pick up recyclable waste on the way back to their depots after delivering. They have regional distribution depots, which could be shared by trucks needing to refuel. Companies may even be able to pool the cost of LPG or CNG fuelling plants, although they do not yet seem to be doing so.

Fourthly, companies see no evidence that manufacturers are providing the engines they would need. Perkins Diesel has recently announced that it is withdrawing its alternative fuel production plant from the UK. Despite obtaining a grant from Powershift, Safeway had to source its engines in Canada. The manufacturers are reluctant to produce, because they are uncertain about the extent to which their products would be sold.

There seems to be a logjam, despite the fact that many people agree that progress is vital. The immediate, oft-touted and easy solution, it is claimed, is for the Government to reduce duty on LPG and CNG. The decision to freeze duty on natural gas and LPG in the 1998 Budget was welcome, but many people now believe that an important incentive could be a reduction in the price of road gas, which would have an effect similar to that of the price differential that converted the UK motorist to lead-free petrol. Such a step is necessary, but not sufficient. We need a declared policy of long-term stability to allow investment planning and a programme to create a refuelling infrastructure that gives confidence to that planning.

I believe that many interest groups are waiting for a lead. That lead could come from the Government, who could at least broker the first moves to generate momentum. More than one of the individuals to whom I spoke during my recent inquiries asked: "Why doesn't someone get all the players together to discuss what might be done? Why don't the fuel suppliers, the major truck fleet operators and the manufacturers all sit around a table and talk about the moves that would get the industry going? Why don't you convene something?"

[Dr. Alan Whitehead]

My contribution, I hope, will be to raise the subject in this Adjournment debate. I recognise the work of the cleaner vehicles task force, but I am not sure whether it addresses the logjam that I have described. I ask my hon. Friend the Minister whether the Government could convene such a round table. I believe that the places around the table would quickly be filled; the results could, in a very few years, be considerable.

I offer that suggestion for what it is worth. I do not expect my hon. Friend—who always seems to have the misfortune to have to reply to Adjournment debates that I initiate—to respond immediately, but I hope that she can give me some encouragement on what I consider to be an important issue for the Government's pollution targets and the general well-being of our country.

10.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): May I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton, Test (Dr. Whitehead) that I do not regard participating in Adjournment debates as a misfortune? It is a privilege, especially when the debate concerns such an important subject.

Air pollution has become a matter of increasing public concern and political importance in recent years. Understanding of the medical effects associated with pollutants has also developed. A report published by the Department of Health earlier this year estimated that, in the UK alone, the short-term effects of air pollution may hasten the deaths of between 12,000 and 24,000 vulnerable people each year. Every year, a similar number of people are admitted to hospital suffering from respiratory illnesses because of short-term air pollution.

Air pollution is of concern to us all, whether we are pedestrians, drivers or cyclists. There is an assumption that, if one is in a car, one is somehow protected from pollution. Regrettably, this is not the case. Last year, my Department published a report based on a review of around 70 studies which showed that car occupants can be subject to levels of pollution two to three times higher than those suffered by pedestrians.

The Government are fully committed to improving the quality of the air we breathe. In July last year, the Government endorsed the national air quality strategy, on the basis that it would be reviewed at the earliest opportunity, with a view to delivering cleaner air more quickly. The Government intend to consult on the outcome of the review in the new year.

Road transport is responsible for a significant proportion of air pollution—for instance, an estimated 50 per cent. of nitrogen oxides come from that source. Any attempt to improve air quality therefore needs to address the problems that road transport can cause.

Increasingly stringent standards for vehicle emissions and fuel quality play an important role in improving air quality. The European auto-oil programme is the first project to propose vehicle emission reduction targets derived from a health-based assessment of air quality needs. It sets emissions standards for both engines and fuels, with increasingly tough standards being brought in from 2000. These standards are expected to halve emissions of particulates and nitrogen oxides by 2005. Although such reductions are obviously to be warmly welcomed, in the longer term those gains could be at risk if traffic growth continues unchecked. Fortunately, the Government have stated publicly that we intend to change direction on transport policy.

It is essential to improve the environmental performance of all vehicles. The cleaner vehicles task force—to which my hon. Friend the Member for Test referred—which my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport co-chairs along with Ian McAllister, chairman and chief executive of Ford UK, has been established to do just that, through promoting the production, purchase and use of cleaner, more fuel-efficient vehicles. At the moment, it is carefully considering, among other things, measures to improve the enforcement of existing emission standards for all vehicles, and the role of alternative fuels.

Alternative fuels such as compressed natural gas and liquid petroleum gas have an important role to play in the quest for cleaner vehicles. Their use can result in substantial reductions in emissions of pollutants such as carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, nitrogen oxides and particulates when compared with conventional diesel. Alternative fuels can also emit less visible smoke and odour than diesel, which is an important consideration for urban areas. They have the potential to offer significant fuel-efficiency benefits.

A less well known benefit of using alternative fuels is the potential reduction in noise compared with that generated by conventional diesel vehicles. My hon. Friend the Member for Test referred to that matter in connection with buses. For example, Safeway has a number of articulated lorries powered by natural gas which it uses for deliveries in the Hammersmith and Fulham area. Because the vehicles are so quiet, the local authority has granted them extended delivery times. A further spin-off benefit is that deliveries can now take place outside the peak rush hours, so reducing congestion.

If we are to develop a truly sustainable transport system, we must consider not only road fuel gases such as LPG and CNG, but a whole range of cleaner fuels and technologies. For example, electric hybrid and fuel cell technologies offer the possibility, in the longer term, of significant reductions in the emission of both local air pollutants and greenhouse gases.

In addition, one must not forget that improved diesel and petrol technology means that those fuels are becoming cleaner and more efficient. For example, the increasingly widespread use of ultra-low-sulphur diesel, which now comprises around 17 per cent. of total diesel supplied, is to be welcomed because that results in significant reductions in particulate emissions.

Indeed, vehicle and fuel technology is generally developing so rapidly that the relative merits of different fuels can change almost from day to day. Government support for alternative fuels and vehicle technology must therefore remain even-handed.

Urban freight distribution raises difficult tensions between business, environment and amenity. The Government support the retail industry, and we certainly want vital, economically healthy town centres; but we want our town centres to be vital from every point of view: attractive places to live, to work and to visit, whether for business or pleasure.

Quality partnerships for freight between the road haulage industry, local authorities, business and the local community will help to develop an understanding of distribution issues and problems at a local level and to promote constructive solutions that reconcile the need for access for goods and services with local environmental and social concerns. Alternative fuels could have a useful role to play in such quality partnerships. For example, Safeway and its CNG delivery vehicles provide an example of a constructive solution that allows goods to be delivered while reducing the environmental impact.

We are committed to encouraging the use of cleaner fuels such as CNG and LPG through a package of measures, including fiscal incentives. My hon. Friend touched on that point earlier. In the most recent Budget, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor froze the duty on road fuel gases for the second year in a row. We are also committed to retaining the differential in duty rates between gas fuels and diesel that existed at the 1997 Budget, to provide some certainty to the market. I hope that my hon. Friend will take comfort from that.

There is now a substantial difference between the duty on CNG and LPG and that on conventional fuels, providing a significant incentive for operators to switch from diesel to gas fuels. Indeed, the differentials are among the largest in the European Union. There are also other cost savings associated with road fuel gases; for instance, in lower maintenance costs.

The Government car service showed that there is a strong economic case for fleet operators to use gas fuels when it announced last year that the economic grounds for using road fuel gases, along with the environmental benefits, were strong enough to persuade it to convert its entire car fleet to run on CNG or LPG over the next five to six years. In a similar vein, the London borough of Merton has estimated that it will save around £5,000 a year for each of the natural gas refuse trucks that it currently operates.

The Government are offering operators of lorries and buses an incentive to adapt their vehicles to a higher environmental standard. From 1 January 1999, the reduced pollution scheme announced by the Chancellor in the March Budget will be implemented by regulations laid before Parliament last week.

Under the scheme, vehicles adapted to meet strict emissions standards will obtain a reduced pollution certificate that will reduce the vehicle excise duty by up to £500 a year. There are two ways in which the standards are likely to be achieved: by re-engining the vehicle to a higher environmental standard—including conversion to run on alternative fuels such as LPG or CNG—or by fitting a device that reduces particulate emissions. The Government believe that the scheme will encourage operators of lorries and buses to improve the environmental performance of their vehicles.

The price premium on larger gas-powered vehicles, such as buses and lorries, is more significant than for cars, partly because not enough vehicles are currently purchased to introduce significant economies of scale. To develop further the market for alternative fuels and to encourage people to buy gas and electric vehicles that are more expensive than their conventionally fuelled counterparts, my Department has funded the Powershift programme, run by the Energy Saving Trust.

Powershift's aim is to create a sustainable market for alternatively powered vehicles by pooling different companies and local authorities interested in purchasing such vehicles into partnerships to increase economies of scale; it provides grants for up to 75 per cent. of the additional cost of purchasing alternatively fuelled vehicles.

To date, Powershift has offered grants to assist in the purchase of more than 1,000 alternatively powered vehicles, including heavy goods vehicles, the majority of which have been ordered in the past year. For instance, the additional conversion costs of the Safeway lorries were partially offset by Powershift grants. Powershift has helped to secure more than £40 million-worth of orders to date.

My right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport recently announced the Government's intention to support Powershift beyond its original three-year time scale. Although the detailed content of the next phase of Powershift's work has yet to be finalised, the programme will continue to support the move to gas-fuelled vehicles but will in addition explore more fully the potential environmental and energy efficiency benefits offered by other emerging technologies such as electric hybrid and fuel cell vehicles.

Under the new system of local air quality management, local authorities must put in place action plans to deal with poor air quality. As air quality tends to be poorest in urban areas, some local authorities may look to introduce low emission zones, areas in towns or cities into which only vehicles producing very low emissions would be allowed to enter. Since gas-powered vehicles are significantly cleaner than their conventionally fuelled counterparts, it is likely that they would be allowed to enter low emission zones: those zones could therefore provide a further boost for clean fuel vehicles.

A closely related project is Alternative Traffic in Towns—or ALTER—which my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister launched in April. Local authorities participating in that Europewide initiative will commit themselves progressively to replace their public vehicle stock with new lower emission vehicles, and to allow access to designated parts of their areas only to vehicles that meet stringent emission standards.

The Government are aware that a number of barriers remain to the further uptake of clean fuel vehicles. Some of those barriers are inherent properties of the fuel. For instance, the tank required to store CNG is large and heavy enough to reduce a bus's capacity by one passenger, or a lorry's payload by around a tonne, as my hon. Friend the Member for Test mentioned. However, there are also other problems, and the cleaner vehicles task force has set up a working group to look at the role for alternative fuels, and the barriers hindering their wider introduction into the marketplace.

One of industry's main concerns is the current limited refuelling infrastructure for both CNG and, to a slightly lesser extent, LPG. The situation is improving, however, in that there are more than 150 public LPG and natural gas refuelling points nationally, and more are being built on petrol station forecourts as demand for those fuels grows. In addition, the Powershift programme has targeted depot-based fleets where refuelling points can be most easily provided.

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

The Government have played their part in providing certainty to the alternative fuels market through their commitment to retaining the differential in duty rates between gas fuels and diesel that existed at the 1997 Budget. We must now look to industry to resolve any difficulties surrounding refuelling infrastructure. However, I am encouraged by recent announcements from fuel suppliers. For example, Shell has announced a £10 million plan to provide a nationwide network of 200 LPG sites by 2001. Other suppliers such as BP and Mobil are also scaling-up their involvement.

The Government have shown their continuing commitment to clean fuel vehicles through fiscal incentives and by giving greater certainty to the market through initiatives such as Powershift and the cleaner vehicles task force. I am pleased to say that some parts of industry are also playing a full and active role through the provision and use of cleaner fuel vehicles and the provision of refuelling infrastructure. However, reducing the pollution produced by road transport in the face of increasing levels of traffic is a continuing challenge, and we cannot afford to be complacent. Government and industry must continue to work together to ensure that we take full advantage of the environmental benefits afforded by cleaner fuels and vehicles.

I will respond to the question put to me by my hon. Friend the Member for Test by ensuring that his remarks and mine are brought to the attention of my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport, so that he may convey them to the other members of the cleaner vehicles task force.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at one minute to Eleven o'clock.

House of Commons

Wednesday 16 December 1998

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Adjournment (Christmas)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

9.33 am

Mr. Tom Cox (Tooting): I want in this debate to talk about child welfare and protection, issues that, in view of recent court cases, should be raised in the House before the Christmas recess. The subject involves us all. I am sure that hon. Members will have been appalled and sickened by the latest court case involving a young child, who was abused for a long time and who died from her injuries. She was killed by her mother's boy-friend, who last week was convicted of her murder and sentenced to life imprisonment; the mother was convicted of cruelty and sentenced to five years' imprisonment. The case was heard at Norwich Crown court; the jury listened to the most appalling history of violence that the five-year-old girl had suffered for a long time.

Hon. Members from both sides of the House know that such events happen far too often. I found it appalling that the very organisations that were supposed to protect the youngster failed abysmally to do so. I am sure that those hon. Members who represent Norfolk constituencies will be asking themselves searching questions, as the social services, the health authority, the police and the RAF—the tragedy happened in RAF accommodation—all let down the youngster appallingly.

Last week, we also heard details of child abuse in Newcastle, where it is said that some 60 children were abused while they were in care. The council is now saying that hundreds of children may have suffered sexual and physical abuse in its care.

On 1 December, I asked my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary to say how many men and women had been sent to prison in England and Wales in the past three years for cruelty to children. I was told that there were 398 cases in 1995, 498 in 1996 and 581 in 1997. I stress that those figures apply only to England and Wales; there has plainly been a substantial increase in child cruelty in the past three years in two of the countries that form the United Kingdom.

I am pleased that you are still in the Chair, Madam Speaker, because, many years ago, we served at the same time on the London borough of Hammersmith, whose children's committee I chaired. I now serve as a member of the British parliamentary delegation to the Council of Europe; I chair the social, health and family affairs committee of that Parliamentary Assembly. The committee considers all kinds of family issues in the 40 member states, but the welfare and protection of children, whatever their age, is our top priority.

That is why I am so concerned about the two cases that I have mentioned. I believe that I have a right, as a Member of Parliament, to ask why such tragic cases continue to occur. I am sure that we can all remember similar cases over the years in which youngsters were brutalised for long periods; many of them, sadly, died from the beatings and suffering that they were forced to endure.

Every time that such a case was heard in court, we were told: "We really must learn from this tragedy. There must be closer co-operation and a better exchange of information. At the first signs of abuse, action will be taken." Those things certainly did not happen in the recent case of the five-year-old girl in Norfolk.

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): I am listening with great attention to the hon. Gentleman, and I share much of his anxiety. Does he agree that, in addition to much better co-ordination and co-operation between the agencies, what this country needs more than anything is a change in the whole public attitude towards children and towards child abuse? Is not that even more important?

Mr. Cox: I fully agree that we need a combination of a much greater awareness of the evils of child abuse with much greater co-ordination of the organisations that are in place to protect children. However, many of those organisations, sadly, fall down in that area. We must not simply ask authorities about the procedures that they should be following, but demand that they follow those procedures—whether they involve education services, health services, social services or the police.

When I chaired the children's committee of the London borough of Hammersmith, I had a clear policy. All officers dealing with children would, at the first sign of concern for the welfare of a youngster, report that case to me. It was my responsibility, in co-ordination with social workers, to keep a close eye on the well-being of that child.

I accept that many social services departments are under great pressure. When they investigate concerns within a family, they are often told that youngsters with bruising on their bodies fell down the stairs, caught their faces on the table or fell down while playing. We know that youngsters do those things, but social services departments must take a far tougher approach when there are concerns about a family.

Very often, abused children who make known their suffering are told, "We just do not believe you." We know that children do lie; I am sure that all of us told fibs as children. However, when youngsters' bodies are covered with bruises, they are not lying. They did not obtain those bruises simply by falling down or by playing around at home. Case after case shows that children have been seriously brutalised by the mother, the father or the boy-friend of the mother. That concerns me greatly.

I wish to refer to the number of cases appearing in our courts where youngsters in residential care have been abused, either physically or sexually, by the clergy or by those responsible for their welfare. This morning's *The Daily Telegraph* carries a report of the case of a man who was the house parent at a Barnardos home who was sentenced at York Crown court yesterday to 11 years' imprisonment for sexually abusing children in his care over some seven years.

[Mr. Cox]

In another case in the courts at the moment, the prosecution has said that a clergyman charged with the abuse of children

"knew they would be very unlikely to make any complaint. Their word against that of a priest would not be believed.

Knowing that he had that protection, virtual immunity from discovery, he committed sexual offences against young people in a calculated and callous manner."

Sadly, we hear of such cases more and more. I hope that we will start to listen to youngsters who express concerns, because when such cases are concluded in our courts, many of the youngsters who have been abused—many of whom are now middle-aged—say that while the abuse was occurring, no one ever listened to them or believed them.

All of us are deeply shocked and appalled by the cases that we hear about in our courts. I hope that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health will, in the coming year, propose legislation to compel authorities to follow the tough and constructive guidelines for the protection of young children—whether at home or in residential care—that I hope my right hon. Friend will introduce. We have heard of far too many cases in recent years of the most appalling abuse of children. It is time that a country such as ours did everything possible to stop that abuse.

9.47 am

Mr. Patrick McLoughlin (West Derbyshire): I start by congratulating the newest member of the Government, the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) on his Front-Bench appointment—an appointment so new that most of us had not heard about it until this morning.

There can be a strange irony in debates such as this, where colleagues do not know the issues that one another will raise. This is a wide-ranging debate, and speeches can spread across the whole sphere of Government policy. I wish to follow the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) in my main theme, which involves child care and child protection. I did not know that the hon. Gentleman was going to raise that matter, but the concerns that he raised will be shared across the House.

I have a different constituency case which, although it is of a similar nature, is not as horrendous as the cases to which the hon. Member for Tooting referred. It concerns the care of children, and the role that grandparents often play in looking after their grandchildren in certain circumstances. As this matter relates to Derby city council, I raised it with the Leader of the House a few days ago—I thought that she might be replying to the debate—to set out my concerns. The case involves the way in which grandparents have stepped into the breach and, I believe, have saved and will save social services a great deal of money by looking after their granddaughter, who otherwise might be put in care.

I wish to outline the circumstances of the case, but I will not be mentioning any names, as I want to deal with the general principle rather than the individual. In July 1998, the Derby city council social worker who had been involved in the case for four years reported that the mother was a drug addict and could no longer care for her two children—a daughter aged 11 and another very young daughter. The grandparents stepped in and have been looking after the eldest girl on a semi-permanent basis.

A case conference was held. The grandfather said:

"The conference apparently recommended that both children should be the subject of 'care and protection' proceedings and removed from their mother's custody."

Long-term problems were discussed, as the grandparents felt that they could look after only the elder child, because of the great stress involved. The grandfather's letter continues:

"The social services worker told us that once care proceedings had been taken we would be 'vetted' and become foster parents . . . and would receive a monthly cash allowance towards her keep.

In September 1998 when nothing appeared to be happening . . . we again spoke to the social worker. She informed us that her senior line manager had decided that 'care' proceedings would only be taken in respect of"

the younger girl.

"It was stated that if we wished we could take a 'residence order' out in respect of"

the elder girl

"(at our expense), and also we could expect no financial support or assistance for"

her

"care whatsoever. The rationale behind the decision being that if she stayed with us she would not be at threat (though she still remains on the 'at risk' register) and therefore there was no need to take out 'care' proceedings in respect of her.

On 25th September, 1998, I had a telephone conversation with"

Derby city social services,

"to ask us if we could care for"

the younger child as well,

"as they were unable to find foster parents. I declined to accept . . . but went on to mention our concerns about lack of progress regarding our financial position with"

the elder child. The social worker

"wrote to us on the 12th October 1998, and I spoke to her by telephone on the 24th. She listened to what I had to say and promised she would respond . . . within 14 days. I have never received any letter or further telephone calls from her.

How do they expect us to finance everything . . . without some form of support? Surely the bringing up of"

the girl

"should be a shared partnership with all parties contributing towards decisions . . .

The financial implications . . . concern us greatly. My wife has no income whatsoever. I am on a pension, having been retired for nine years. We are not even in receipt of child benefit."

I hope that the child benefit will be sorted out soon. The letter continues:

"We have no public transport near our home so we have to transport"

the girl

"to and from school every day and sometimes more than once if she has special events at school.

We have just fitted"

her

"out with a new school uniform when she started senior school in September. Application for retrospective financial assistance for this uniform was refused. Clothes, food, pocket money, guides, drama classes, dancing classes, everyday expenses, mean we now have to seriously deprive ourselves of little luxuries (no foreign holiday this

year). The whole cost of her life is such that we feel hurt and angry with the impact it is having on us. The school is organising a trip to Germany . . . We were forced to tell"

the girl

"that we could not afford the trip—application for financial assistance for this was also refused."

What hits me about this case is the fact that if the grandparents refused to take responsibility for the child, it would create a major expense for Derby city social services. The grandparents' good offices are being used, if not abused. If elderly people need to be looked after in a home, attendance allowance can be claimed. It seems a great pity that no such allowance is made when grandparents take over in loco parentis.

There are questions in the case that disturb both the grandparents and myself. I hope that they can be speedily resolved. I was encouraged by the story in *The Times* on 5 November, under the headline,

"Straw aims to put focus on the family"

which specifically mentioned grandparents. In the review that is taking place, we need clearer guidelines on what should happen in cases such as the one I have cited.

I have no doubt that Derby city council has sufficient flexibility under the current rules to pay an allowance to the grandparents as carers. That should happen. The child is being looked after far better by her grandparents than she would be in a foster home, especially considering the disruption that she has already experienced.

It is a great pity that the most sensible solution, provided by the grandparents, is to some extent being abused by the city council, which is relying on their good will and on the fact that, although they are not wealthy, the grandfather has a modest pension from the public sector, in which he worked for many years in a fairly distinguished role. I seek an assurance that the Government will consider the matter seriously.

My next point may not elicit as much sympathy from the Minister. This has been an unusual year; I am speaking of the calendar rather than the parliamentary year. I am glad to see that the hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) is here. Before the general election, he and his colleagues travelled around Derbyshire telling everyone that Labour would get a fair deal for Derbyshire and all our problems would be sorted out by the new, vibrant—well, he might not have used those words—Labour party; so it was astounding to me that this year was the one in which the Government decided to cap the county council.

We went through 18 years of Conservative government in which the council was capped only once. Within a year of a new Labour Government, they had managed to match that record of capping Derbyshire once. They capped it to the tune of £1 million. To an individual, £1 million is a lot of money, but in a budget of £470 million it does not have much bearing on the overall costing.

The capping has resulted in rebilling every household, which has cost an estimated £320,000. It was a token gesture, and I consider it deplorable. The people in Amber Valley have still not had their new bills. Is it a sign of new Labour efficiency that, almost six months after the capping, we still do not have our new bills? By the time we get them, it will be time for the bills for next year's council tax. That is wholly regrettable. The cut for 40 per cent. of the properties is £2.82; more than that will be spent on postage and printing. The move was ridiculous and nonsensical, and is typical of the Labour Government's approach to local government finance, which they have not thought through. We wait with interest to see what happens over the next year.

Child care is a very important issue. I hope that when the Government consider it, they will also consider some of the wider implications of what I have said today about whether it is necessary or desirable for each city or county council to be able to set its own guidelines and rules, when they should really be working within a national framework.

9.59 am

Mr. Brian Sedgemore (Hackney, South and Shoreditch): I am delighted to make a brief speech this morning, but first I wish to join in the congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) on his sneaky elevation to high office. I was green with envy and wondered what he has that I have not, but the answer is, of course, that he has a beard. I had thought that beards represented old Liberalism, but I am rethinking my position and my turn may come in 2000.

The House should not adjourn until we have had a statement on the future of a freedom of information Act. That has become important because the coalition between Tory peers and Labour Front Benchers is now working and we were promised an early freedom of information Act if that were the case. The Labour party has rightly promised a freedom of information Act for the past 25 years. As each of the secrecy scandals—Ponting, Tisdall, "Spycatcher", Matrix Churchill, Pergau, BSE and cash for questions—broke, we said that everything would be different under Labour, because we would have a freedom of information Act. We put it in our manifesto in 1974, 1979, 1983, 1987, 1992 and 1997; it is probably unique in the history of broken manifesto promises in lasting 25 years. I hope that before the House rises, we shall have a statement to say that the manifesto promise will be kept in 1999.

I know that I have the Prime Minister's support, because he is often quoted as saying that a freedom of information Act is not an add-on, but essential to Labour's thinking. He has said that such a change

"is absolutely fundamental to how we see politics developing in this country over the next few years . . . It would also signal a culture change that would make a dramatic difference to the way that Britain is governed."

It is also important that an Act should be introduced early in this Government's term of office, rather than later, because once Ministers have been in office for a while they tend to become more cautious. They tend to think that a freedom of information Act might arm their critics. If we should have an economic downturn, which I hope that we do not, Ministers will become ever more cautious. Therefore, the sooner an Act is introduced and the sooner we have a statement, either today or tomorrow, the better.

A freedom of information Act would answer all those smears about new Labour being run by spin doctors and control freaks. We know that there are no spin doctors and no control freaks in new Labour. An announcement today on a freedom of information Act would get rid of all the banter. It is good fun, but it has become a little tedious.

[Mr. Brian Sedgemore]

The concomitant of a freedom of information Act is a fair, responsible and independent press. Therefore, I hope that we shall have some time between now and Christmas to consider the claim that Dominic Lawson, the editor of *The Sunday Telegraph*, is a paid MI6 agent. That is an odd claim and would be very damaging for the press if it were true. The allegation has been made by Richard Tomlinson and I have no idea whether it is true, but we should consider it. I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister would respond to those two points.

10.3 am

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak briefly about a threat to our democracy that arises from the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998, which has just reached the statute book. I know that it has just reached the statute book because I received a letter from the registrar asking, rather flatteringly, whether I wished to register myself as a political party. Alongside that, I saw a press release from the Home Office which said that under the terms of the Act it is not possible to register as an Independent. That is strange, because I stood in the election as an Independent and I sit in the House as an Independent. What else should I be? The Tatton Park party, the Flat Earth party or the Knutsford Heath party? It does not make sense.

My complaint is not, however, on my own behalf, but on behalf of many other independent-minded members of established parties. One of the provisions of the Act is that certain qualifiers may not be attached to the name of an established party, and one of those qualifiers is "Independent". From now on, it will be against the law to stand as Independent Labour, Independent Conservative or Independent Liberal Democrat. That clause arose from the Literal Democrat fiasco, when an individual stood as a Literal Democrat deliberately to confuse the voters and so far succeeded in doing so as to draw enough votes from the Liberal Democrats to cost them a seat in the European Parliament.

However, the provision was extended in such a way as to prohibit the right of an individual who has fallen out with his party to stand as an independent member of that party. Suppose, for example, he votes against the party Whip once too often, is seen in Westminster during a constituency week, fails to answer the vibrations of his pager or upsets his local constituency party. For one of those reasons or a combination, he might be deselected and might, rightly, wish to fight for his seat under the label of Independent Labour, Conservative or Liberal Democrat.

In the extraordinary circumstances of the Tatton election, in May last year, a well-established member of the Tatton Conservative Association, who was not happy with the way things were going, thought seriously of standing as an Independent Conservative. I wished that he would not and told him so—and he did not—but he had a right to do so. If that situation were repeated, he would no longer have a right to do so.

The Act also applies to local government. There is an Independent Labour group on Hull city council, with three elected members and two who have crossed the floor. They will no longer be able to stand as Independent Labour. I have nothing against parties. They are necessary for Government and may even be necessary for Opposition, but some space must be given to free spirits, independent-minded people and people a little outside the system, such as citizen politicians. They do not threaten the system, but reinforce it by adding legitimacy to the members of established parties who get elected.

Threats to our democracy come in many forms and sometimes arise from not very large issues. Yesterday, in the Ecclesiastical Committee, we fought off and blocked a move by the Church Synod to allow a bishop to suspend a church warden for up to two years for a cause that seemed to the bishop to be good and reasonable, which is the very language of the abuse of power. We have had a democracy of one kind or another for hundreds of years and this was the first time that a person elected by many could have been removed by one.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): Will the hon. Gentleman acknowledge that we have not yet seen off that proposal?

Mr. Bell: We have not, but my goodness, we will. If it comes to the Floor of the House, we shall make a mighty fight of it.

As I have said, one threat to our democracy comes from the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998, and another comes from a measure that is being railroaded through now—the European Parliamentary Elections Bill—which seems to have come straight out of the rule book of the old Albanian Communist party. In both cases, the interests of parties are being put ahead of the rights of individuals. On all those issues, as on many others, we in this House stand on the ramparts of democracy and we have a duty to defend them.

10.8 am

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): I am grateful for the opportunity to make some comments on regional government and regeneration in the north-west of England. I have been keen to do so for some time, but first I wish to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) on his well-deserved promotion. In the north-west, we have a strong regional identity and we can show that a track record of successful partnership already exists between Members of Parliament and key public and private stakeholders. For example, in 1994 we created the North-West Partnership, which has now smoothly evolved into the North-West regional chamber. We developed a north-west regional economic strategy in 1993 and revised it in 1996, and developed a family of strategies on transport, human resource development, social inclusion and economic development. We have also developed a regional innovation and technology plan, and a regional rail strategy is in preparation.

We have created a unique agency—Sustainability North West—to co-ordinate environment and sustainability initiatives across the region, including innovative work on climate change. We have a long history of working on information society issues. The GEMISIS project, based at Salford university, acts as the host to similar initiatives in the region that aim to improve the capability of small and medium-sized enterprises through the information super-highway. Leading work has also been done on the year 2000 issue.

The potential for growth and prosperity in the north-west is undeniable. The region's economy is larger than those of four European Union member states, and it generates a gross domestic product of more than £67 billion, accounting for 15 per cent. of the United Kingdom's manufacturing output. Eight of the *Financial Times* top 100 companies have a presence in the region.

The region also has pressing needs, however. We are ranked seventh of 11 in regional GDP per head, and the index of local deprivation identifies 15 of the 55 most deprived local authority areas in the country as being in the north-west, including two of the top three.

What are the region's next steps? I have always strongly advocated full regional government, and I see regional development agencies as a first step towards that goal. When guidance was issued recently on the roles and responsibilities of new RDAs, I was disappointed that there was no formal or proposed statutory role for regional chambers. Moreover, the Government's regional economic, social and environmental agenda can be successfully addressed only by a more formal partnership between bodies such as the North-West regional chamber, the RDA and the Government office of the north-west.

If we are to further an integrated approach to many of the region's pressing needs, we need clarity about how both strategic and day-to-day operation functions will be discharged by the RDA, particularly as regards key regional players, such as the regional chamber. I should appreciate clarification from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on whether designated regional partners have the ability to make their own formal agreements to deliver Government targets and objectives.

In response to the covering paper that accompanies the draft guidance, I suggest the following qualitative and quantitative performance indicators for the regional development agencies: job creation targets for long-term and/or permanent-contract jobs; job-related terms and contract conditions targets; and sector and skill-specific job-related targets. In addition to existing measures on competitiveness, regional GDP must also be assessed in terms of north-west business growth sectors and the expansion of inward investment-connected supply chain links. The regional baseline against which such indicators could be assessed is a further issue requiring clarification and agreement. We should be fully involved in determining a baseline position for the north-west region.

I turn now to the regional development agency and the improvement of economic performance. The direction of draft guidance is towards integration and a framework for delivery of Government programmes. Given the absence of executive responsibility for delivery, the institutional map of local economic development will become complicated over such issues as the single regeneration budget, the role of training and enterprise councils and business links. A regional review of who does what should be incorporated in the aforementioned agreement to ensure that there is no danger of overlapping competencies and unprofitable competition for resources. That should be associated with an honest assessment of capability and the championing by the RDA and the regional chamber of centres or providers of excellence.

In the north-west, skills and reskilling needs are being tackled in a strategic human resource development context, and it is very much my view that the guidance should take that approach. Strong links are required with the national action employment plan and with European guidelines under the employment chapter.

The draft guidance emphasises the need for close collaboration between work on the RDAs' strategies and work on the broader based regional planning strategy set out in regional planning guidance. The role of the regional planning body as a key regional player for the RDA is highlighted, and the regional chamber will effectively fulfil that function in the north-west. The timing of work on the two strategies will be significant, and I propose that guidance should acknowledge the status of the chamber's advice on regional planning guidance—as should any final document—given that it will be subject to non-statutory examination.

Let me offer some thoughts on the RDA, regional partnerships, cross-regional working and Europe. I expect published guidance to acknowledge that the overarching partnership for regional development agencies is that with the respective regional chamber or assembly. Experience tells us that the logical conclusions for that area of the guidance should be that closer links should be forged with members of the Committee of the Regions, and that the regional focus of future Members of the European Parliament should be acknowledged and developed.

I seek confirmation from the DETR that our well-developed partnership approach and the route to EU structural funds should be consequent on strategies and bids prepared by the chamber, its stakeholders and its member bodies, following the consultation on the regional economic strategy with the RDA that I mentioned earlier. That said, it should be made clear that while the RDA will have a role in resource allocation, it will also work closely with local authority partners to identify priorities and to implement local strategies. Throughout the guidance, reference to regional partnerships should give more prominence to the building of social partnerships, and that should refer explicitly to relevant economic, social and ethnic groups.

Sustainable development and social inclusion have a lower profile than was anticipated in the White Paper "Building Partnerships for Prosperity", which placed both at the heart of Government programmes. Those two initiatives are not optional, but fundamental to the progress of the north-west.

In conclusion, I shall refer briefly to two other important issues—housing and transport. In November, I hosted the launch of the Greater Manchester and Merseyside housing manifesto at the House of Commons. The manifesto rightly acknowledges that the availability of housing of the right quality in a good environment is one factor that inward investors take into account in considering a region as a location for their business. It recognises the need for co-ordination and co-operation between the public and private sectors to develop housing strategies, and to link them to corporate strategies and plans for urban regeneration. I am pleased that the Minister for Local Government and Housing has agreed to meet authorities in the north-west to discuss the manifesto.

On transport, the chairman of the Greater Manchester passenger transport executive, councillor Joe Clarke, has said:

"Public transport is an indispensable element of a vibrant economy."

[Mr. Ian Stewart]

I agree. I praise the Greater Manchester transport integration project, the largest quality partnership in the country, which has brought together the Greater Manchester PTE, 10 local authorities, local transport operators, Manchester airport and the Highways Agency. In my own constituency of Eccles, metrolink is being extended with enormous economic and environmental benefits, and with an anticipated 10,000 jobs when the full network is on stream.

The Government's proposals for an integrated transport system are crucial to regeneration in the north-west. If the region's publicly owned airports are to play their part in the regeneration process, they need to be freed from legal constraints that prevent them from working in full partnership with other transport operators.

I feel sure that the Minister will not mind if, in Salford parlance, I indulge in just a little more mithering. We all want to see the upgrading of the west coast main line, and the upgrading of the gauge between Glasgow and the channel tunnel should be a priority. That would assist the transfer from road to rail, which I fully endorse, and it would ensure the full co-ordination of the upgrade with engineering work needed to allow faster tilting trains to operate on the west coast main line. I know that the north-west regional chamber is anxious to achieve early progress on the issue.

All in all, the future of the north-west can be positive, but we shall need national and European assistance to sustain our progress and to reach our full and exciting potential.

10.20 am

Mr. Andrew Rowe (Faversham and Mid-Kent): There are four reasons why the House should not adjourn. The first subject that requires debating is the channel tunnel rail link. Railtrack is really British Rail in modern clothes and the truth is that British Rail personnel always wanted Waterloo—their glossy station—to be the terminus of the channel tunnel rail link. To my anxiety, they are close to ensuring that the only part of the channel tunnel rail link that appears likely to be built is the one that will do exactly what they want—finish in Waterloo.

In fact, the line between Waterloo and Fawkham junction cannot be turned into a high-speed line, so we face the glamorous probability that our high-speed rail link will run from Brussels or Paris to Fawkham Junction—a destination whose name has all the resonance of a wet blanket. It is worrying that Railtrack has actually admitted that, under current plans and despite the upgrading of Fawkham Junction, it is highly unlikely that there will be any train paths to enable passengers on the channel tunnel rail link phase 1 to go through Fawkham Junction during commuter periods. The Government say that that is perfectly all right, because phase 2 will undoubtedly be built. However, I very much doubt that: there is no assurance that Railtrack, which has guaranteed to buy phase 1, will ever buy phase 2.

It is worth considering why Railtrack should have bid for phase 1. If no bank in the City would touch it, how was it that, on the day that Railtrack announced that it would buy phase 1 of a clearly unprofitable line, shares in the company rose? The answer is, first, that Railtrack wanted one part of its activities not to be subject to the Rail Regulator, so it bought into the channel tunnel rail link. The company was perfectly open about that; its representatives told a meeting that I chaired that that was the company's principle objective.

Perhaps more revealing is the fact that, on the day that the Secretary of State turned the first sod in the building of the channel tunnel rail link, the chief executive of Railtrack was heard on the "Today" programme to say, "Of course, our bidding for the second part of the channel tunnel rail link will depend on whether the Rail Regulator leaves us with enough profit to be able to buy it." In other words, Railtrack has taken a clear decision to attempt to blackmail the Rail Regulator into allowing the company to levy access charges on the private train operators at a level that will enable it to secure a profitability capable of enabling it to buy phase 2 of the channel tunnel rail link.

That has never been admitted by the Government, but it is clearly Railtrack's strategy and the reason why its shares went up. It is disgraceful, because if, through access charges, Railtrack exerts enough squeeze on the private railway companies to force those companies to cut back services, the Secretary of State will be able to come to the House and say, "There you are—we always told you that private railway lines don't work." In fact, it will have had nothing to do with private railways, and everything to do with Railtrack, in connivance with the Government, having been excused from proper regulation of its charges.

There is a shadow hanging over Railtrack. I understand that the provisional report of the Rail Regulator suggests that Railtrack's profits are too high—the company is said to be overcharging train operators already. If that is so, the Government might decide that that is an improper way in which to deal with Railtrack's charging and start to regulate it. If they do that, Railtrack will turn around and say that it will not bid for phase 2 of the channel tunnel rail link.

If that happens, my county of Kent will have been ploughed up for a line that does Kent no good at all. The development strategy of Kent and the Thames corridor depends on phase 2 going through Ebbsfleet, around to St. Pancras and linking the north-west to the channel tunnel. Without phase 2, the entire expense of phase 1—theoretically £1.7 billion, but I suspect that it will have risen to £2.5 billion by the time that construction is completed—will have been wasted, but the effort will have destroyed my county. I have asked the Public Accounts Committee to look into the case and I am glad to say that it has agreed to do so. The Committee does not often get the chance to investigate the waste of Government money before it happens, but on this occasion it has a chance to intervene.

There is no prospect of the channel tunnel rail link making a profit, even if it were to be completed within the next 10 to 20 years. The annual loss on Eurostar, which is currently the only source of revenue of London and Continental Railways, is £150 million. The company is proud of the fact that it believes that, this year, that loss will be reduced to £90 million. At Railtrack's extraordinary general meeting, it was forced to reveal that it was looking for an even higher rate of return than the 8 per cent. the Government have guaranteed. I believe that a deal has been done—one that our open Government have not put into the public domain—to ensure a considerably higher guaranteed return for Railtrack.

As I told the National Audit Office, the best estimate is that phase 1 of the channel tunnel rail link will entail a subsidy of £40 per passenger journey; and that, if phase 2 were to be built, that figure would rise to £60 per passenger journey. I did not want the line to use the tracks it is to use, nor to be designed as it has been, but I now want it to be built, because it is our future. However, we are proposing to throw £1.7 billion or £2.5 billion down the drain; think of the number of alternative transport routes and improvements that that money could have bought.

The second reason why the House should not adjourn is that it is time we took a quick look at the fruit industry in Kent. Hon. Members smile, but they should bear in mind that it is a big industry and an import-saving industry at that. It is difficult to make accurate calculations, but we think that as many as 30,000 full-time equivalent jobs are operated by the fruit industry in Kent alone. There are several fruit farmers in Kent whose annual wage bill exceeds £1 million. We are talking about not some tinpot little local industry, but one of Britain's major industries. I might add that it is one part of the agricultural sector that does not receive one penny in subsidy.

The industry is under threat from several sources, but I shall mention only three. The first is supermarket bullying. It is time that the supermarkets of this country were called properly to account. Let me give two examples. The other day, a local fruit farmer who is one of my constituents received a letter from one of the big supermarket chains—

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): Name it.

Mr. Rowe: All right: Marks and Spencer. The letter asked for a donation to charitable funds of £3,000. However, when that donation is made, it goes in not as a contribution from the fruit farmer, but as one from Marks and Spencer. If that is not an abuse of market power, what is?

Another supermarket—I will not name it as I believe that the farmer concerned is taking the wrong approach—told one of my constituents that it had rejected a load of strawberries. The next day, the farmer went to the supermarket and asked to have his strawberries returned. He was told that it was difficult to know exactly what had happened to them. So he walked around the supermarket and found his strawberries upon the shelves.

Mr. Clark: That is criminal.

Mr. Rowe: I think that my constituent should prosecute the supermarket, but he does not want to risk damaging his capacity to supply supermarkets with strawberries in future. If that is not an abuse of market power, what is?

The Government have a direct opportunity to intervene and address another difficulty in this area. A major, although not the biggest, problem facing the fruit industry is that it cannot find pickers. Sadly, the only reliable pickers that may be easily employed are foreign students. They work extremely hard as they want to make money and take it home. However, only a very small quota of such workers is allowed and we would like it to be enlarged. The opposing argument is that those workers are taking jobs away from British pickers. However, we cannot get British pickers, partly because complex and hostile social security arrangements make them difficult to employ.

For example, it takes anything up to six weeks for pickers to re-enter the social security system. If it rains for a fortnight, pickers will have no income. Most of them have no savings, so they will be in serious trouble. When the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) was Minister for Welfare Reform—before he was sacked—I took him to visit a fruit farm. He understood the difficulties facing workers and the industry, and I hope that current Ministers are examining that serious issue.

There is also a problem with the national minimum wage. Pickers are paid for piecework. If they choose to spend half an hour or an hour chatting to their friends or picnicking on the edge of a field on a lovely hot day, they might not pick enough fruit to ensure that the piecework rate comfortably exceeds the minimum wage. Farmers are worried that they will be compelled to pay the minimum wage to workers who have been in the fields for a number of hours but not yielded any product. I hope that the Government will consider that issue.

The social security arrangements for part-time work are terribly important on a much wider scale. A recent survey showed that 24 per cent. of workers in the Dover area now work part time. I have always argued for a minimum income and, with the introduction of the national minimum wage, that is now a possibility. However, unless we can encourage people to take part-time work, we will never persuade them into a habit of work in this fluid labour market.

The third issue is the price of diesel. That sounds humorous, but it is a serious matter. The price of diesel is so much cheaper in France than in Britain that it pays hauliers from my county to take their lorries across the channel, fill their tanks and run for a week on cheap French diesel. More importantly, with the removal of cabotage, French and Belgian truckers can operate at much cheaper rates and take work from Kentish and other truckers in the south of Britain. They will gradually push the local truckers out of business.

The noble Lord Whitty sent me not one but two absurd replies on that subject. He said that the Government keep increasing diesel charges in Britain because they want to reduce pollution. He has never explained how it helps to reduce pollution by substituting French for British lorries—I would love to know how that works.

My final point concerns the future of Kent and Canterbury hospital. We are still awaiting the Secretary of State's judgment on the matter, and many of us are comforted by the fact that he is taking so long to make up his mind. The hospital's work load has increased since the review reached the Secretary of State. It has been shown to be the third most cost-effective hospital in the United Kingdom and several of its teams have been singled out as excellent. Opinion in my town of Faversham is unanimously against downgrading the hospital, and I hope that the Secretary of State will find in its favour soon.

10.35 am

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas (Harrow, West): I join other hon. Members in congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) on his elevation to the Front Bench. In my brief contribution, I shall concentrate

[Mr. Gareth R. Thomas]

on how English Heritage allocates its conservation area funding. In particular, I shall highlight how Harrow on the Hill—a key historic part of my constituency, with eight conservation areas in a relatively small geographical area—has been unable to access English Heritage funding for environmental improvements and tackling traffic management problems.

In essence, the problem lies in English Heritage's insistence that a large component of its conservation area grants must be directed towards building repair work. I state at the outset that I think English Heritage does an excellent job. Its annual report details 409 properties and sites under its control, which received more than 11.5 million visitors this year. English Heritage membership is at an all-time high of 384,000 and it has managed to achieve a 60 per cent. increase in its non-government income in the past few years. I am pleased that, since the general election, English Heritage has reorganised its service on a regional basis in order to ensure that its work has a much more local public face, which enables it to be a key partner in regeneration activity.

Nevertheless, I think that further changes to at least part of English Heritage's funding streams will be necessary if my constituents are to be truly able to enjoy the beauty and the history of Harrow on the Hill. History there is aplenty. The hill can claim to be the only remaining former pagan site of worship in London. Records dating as far back as the seventh century refer to Harrow on the Hill, and it is featured in the Domesday book. For more than 1,000 years, Harrow on the Hill was the centre of Harrow. Only the onset of the railway precipitated a gradual shift in Harrow's economic life from the hill to its present location in the Harrow-Wealdstone corridor.

The hill retains many of its key historical features. Beautiful St. Mary's church, which was founded in 1078, has key links with the Archbishop of Canterbury and was visited by Thomas a Becket a few days before his murder. Lord Byron is reputed to have composed some of his early poetry while lying on a tomb in St. Mary's churchyard. The Kings Head complex, which is currently in desperate need of restoration to its former incarnation as a hotel, dates back to 1535 and was used as a hunting lodge by Henry VIII. Seven Prime Ministers have attended the famous Harrow school at the top of the hill, as did the great pacifist, G. M. Trevelyan, who became a Labour Member of Parliament and served in the first Labour Cabinet in 1924. Roxeth school, which is now an excellent state first and middle school, was established in 1850 thanks to the generosity of the then Lord Shaftesbury.

In the past 10 years, it has become clear that Harrow on the Hill is experiencing several significant interconnected problems. I shall give two examples. First, changes in shopping patterns, including the development of large supermarkets off the hill, have led to the closure of most local retail outlets at the top of the hill. Secondly, the increasing impact and volume of traffic—particularly the speed of vehicles moving across the top of the hill—have caused significant problems. I hope that the Government office for London will quickly endorse the view of Harrow council, which is now run by an excellent new Labour administration, that the main road over the hill should be downgraded so that traffic management schemes can be implemented.

Those interconnected problems have led to an overall decline in the environmental quality of the hill area. In 1995, in recognition of those problems, the council secured the support of English Heritage to undertake an environmental study of the area to analyse its problems and suggest solutions. Harrow council introduced a series of key policy commitments and initiatives. A key part of that was the establishment of the Harrow on the Hill forum, which is a partnership between the business interests that remain on the hill, the school, Harrow council and local residents' associations, including the excellent Harrow Hill trust.

The forum has drawn up a strategy for the hill's future, a key part of which has been to secure funding for much-needed environmental improvement works appropriate to the area's character. In my previous role—it seems almost like a previous life—as a councillor in Harrow, I served on the Harrow on the Hill forum. The vision that we developed, which still holds, was of a regenerated core area around a refurbished, modern Kings Head hotel, appealing to a niche market of tourist-based businesses such as those dealing in arts, crafts and antiques. That would reflect the businesses left on the hill and be in keeping with areas similar to Harrow on the Hill.

Crucial to the implementation of that vision was funding to improve public access to and enjoyment of the hill area. With that in mind, in 1997 a bid was made to the heritage lottery fund's townscape scheme. Unfortunately, it was rejected due to a lack of focus on building repair schemes. Building repair is not the key issue in Harrow on the Hill, thanks to the high commitment of local residents and owners to the maintenance of their properties.

At the same time, English Heritage had a similar funding scheme—a conservation area partnership scheme—but that, too, required a great deal of building repair to be necessary before funding approval would be considered. The final round of that scheme, in the form of a partnership between English Heritage and the heritage lottery fund, has recently been announced, together with the heritage lottery fund's new townscape heritage initiative. Again, the funding available under those schemes is aimed primarily at building repair, with too little focus on environmental improvement of the public realm and the space around buildings.

Grants for building repair are clearly important, but it is important also for funders to recognise that, in many areas, the key is not building repair but the environment between buildings and the impact of traffic on those areas. The failure to invest in environmental improvements in public areas can have, and indeed has had, a detrimental effect on the perceived commitment to an area. In the case of Harrow on the Hill, that has been demonstrated by a lack of investment by businesses and other bodies and hence a lack of economic viability and vitality. The repair and improvement of the actual street scene is crucial if we are to preserve the area's special character and interest and then build up its economic viability and vitality.

There is strong public support for the environmental works envisaged by the council. We know that from the many responses to the public consultation, which was part of the original English Heritage-funded study, and from

the partnership support generated by the Harrow on the Hill forum for the failed heritage lottery fund bid. Those environmental improvements could be achieved for sums that are relatively modest in comparison with those needed for building repair schemes.

I welcome the new initiative to improve green spaces and create sustainable communities outlined in the consultation paper, "New Links for the Lottery", which was recently announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. That will be funded through the new opportunities fund, which is a key reform of the lottery that the Government have introduced. That may go some way to fill the gap in non-building repair-based conservation area funding. English Heritage is currently reviewing its role and the way in which it allocates conservation area funding, and I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will ensure that it takes on board the points that I have made so that we can protect and enhance the Harrow on the Hills of our nation.

10.45 am

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): I welcome the Minister to his Front-Bench position. In the light of a briefing from, and discussion with, the Disability Benefits Consortium yesterday, I hope that the hon. Gentleman, who represents Sherwood, will guide the Government and, like Robin Hood, take from the rich, not the poor. The figures given by the consortium suggested that, although it has been claimed that more and more money is being given to disabled people, much of that money has been taken from them. We should like an assurance that it will be given back in the form of investment in the development of services for those with disabilities.

I shall not follow the remarks of the hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) because he dealt specifically with constituency issues. He presented his case very well. When the hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) was speaking about his position on regional government, I smiled wryly because I thought of how the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (Sir E. Heath), chided the previous Government because they were slow to give devolution. He said that we should not be worried about that because we gave Germany devolution. However, we gave Germany not devolution but federalism.

Having propounded federalism 20 years ago, I regret that we are only now beginning to think it through and are engaged in devolution of power without knowing what is our aim. At the time, I suggested that we should not spend so much money on developing new buildings around London because we should be developing regional assemblies and diversifying power to the communities, and should have a central Administration—a federal Government—dealing with the bigger issues.

As we have moved, rightly, towards regional devolution, I want to raise issues, particularly health issues, that affect the emerging Administration in Northern Ireland. In the past 18 months, we have grown used in this place to yah-boo politics, whereby each side blames faults on the other. The new Northern Ireland Administration will not have the luxury of being able to blame any faults on people who have administered Northern Ireland for more than 20 years. They must therefore tackle the issues.

About a week ago, the Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, the hon. Member for Dumbarton (Mr. McFall), who is responsible for health issues, was reported in the media as saying that Northern Ireland had to make progress because its health problems and hospital provision were far worse than any other area in the United Kingdom. I am not sure that he was right, and he has subsequently been praising the health service in Northern Ireland.

I welcome the moves to improve the ambulance service in Northern Ireland, which are long overdue. There is still a long way to go, particularly if we are determined to go ahead with the golden six hospitals, because that means that, in many areas of Northern Ireland, there will be difficulties in transporting patients speedily to hospital. Circumstances are changing and if, as we hope, they become more peaceful, the health service will not have the provision of, for example, the helicopter service of the Army Air Corps. A helicopter ambulance may be required to serve the Province in emergencies to transport people faster to regional provision in Belfast.

At the same time, I hope that those serving in the ambulance service will not repeat some of the follies that were committed in England during modernisation and the introduction of computer technology in an attempt to direct ambulances speedily to where they were to pick up a patient. At first, it was thought that there were spies in the cab when in fact they were meant to be aids. Technology is vital if we are to progress.

I recently read the minutes of the Eastern health and social services board. They were challenging. I know that, since those minutes were taken, more money has been promised to the service, but one of the concerns that they raised, which was revealed again last week in a Northern Ireland Grand Committee, is that some figures show front loading. In other words, there seems to be more money up front for the next two years and then a decline in the third.

It is 50 years since the establishment of the national health service. Although we have a fine health service, we do not seem able to reach the point where all diseases are treated. The harsh reality is that modern developments in the health service mean that we have given longevity to many people, which means an increase in the number to be treated, but, in addition, new strains of viruses are coming into the country.

My plea is that Northern Ireland should be brought into line with the rest of the kingdom where, for years, there has been core funding for the Myalgic Encephalomyelitis Association. The Minister has said that he will examine the matter, but a disease that is having such an impact on our society should at least have some core funding in Northern Ireland as well.

The health board's minutes also show problems with residential provision, especially for people with learning difficulties. Commitments were given to parents and guardians of people at Muckamore Abbey hospital that those people would not be moved without their consent. I understand the need for change. I recommended community care, but I accept that that system needs a great deal of improvement. However, commitments should be honoured if we are not to lose the trust of our people.

The hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) mentioned the care of children. As many of the statutory homes have been closed, we no longer have the necessary provision,

[Rev. Martin Smyth]

which means that there is pressure on social services to provide emergency accommodation for young people in urgent need of care and protection. I urge the Department to examine that again.

As for waiting lists, we have been promised the moon time and again. One problem that the House and the Department have not faced up to is that the greater success we have in ministering to people surgically and medically, the more come forward. In times of financial stringency, we have to accept the harsh fact that the first few days after any operation are the most costly, so a greater through-put of patients means greater pressure on the health service. I do not believe that the Department, or the Treasury in particular, has yet recognised that.

Waiting lists continue. According to recent reports, in 1997–98 fewer patients were seen within the accepted time scale. Of course, there seems to be discrepancies between hospitals in the quality of service that they offer. I should like that to be highlighted so that we can solve the difficulties.

One of the difficulties that I have is reading the tables, which do not compare like with like. For example, the recent figures show the breast cancer mortality ratio aggregated over the years 1994 to 1996. The tables also show breast screening figures for 1995, 1996 and 1997. Would it not be possible to compare like with like so that we know what is really happening? I welcome the fact that the Northern health and social services board has the best figures, while the Southern board apparently has the worst. Interestingly, the Eastern board is second in terms of mortality rates, yet, over the previous three years, had the lowest screening rate at 69 per cent. That leads one to ask to what extent screening helps.

Talking about children took me back to the problems of security and its impact on hospital care. That issue was highlighted when Omagh hospital came to prominence as a result of the tragic bombing in that town. People are demanding that that event means that the hospital should stay. Those responsible for the review will have to take into consideration the need for provision, but the people who have supplied the finances in Northern Ireland have not properly understood the impact on ordinary care and elective surgery of the emergencies created by terror.

Vincent McKenna is a constituent of mine. I doubt that he will ever vote for me, as we come from entirely different backgrounds, but he has done meticulous work in highlighting what has been happening even in the past eight months of peace. During that period, some 1,000 children in the Province have been affected by terror. Some have been brutally murdered, some have been traumatised by seeing their families and other relatives shot before their eyes, some have been injured, some have been sexually abused, and many have been expelled from the Province with their parents by terrorist organisations. The authorities—I especially indict the Northern Ireland Office—constantly hide behind the claim that they are acting on the best security advice, but men like McKenna, who was himself brutally beaten by those he knew to be members of the Provisional IRA, are discounted because the mythology is that we are keeping the peace. We have to wise up.

It is interesting that, the last time an attempt was made to change the Royal Ulster Constabulary, a Labour Administration were in power. It is also interesting that, as my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr. Ross) can confirm, one of the folk involved at that time was Sir Arthur Young, who came from the Metropolitan constabulary. If my memory serves me correctly, we now have on the Patten commission a former deputy commissioner of the Met. One can understand a certain cynicism in Northern Ireland about that. There is a serious charge of corruption against the Met, but a former deputy commissioner from the Met is now seeking to reform the RUC. Charity begins at home—

Mr. William Ross (East Londonderry): And reform, too.

Rev. Martin Smyth: Indeed, reform begins at home, too.

I have received communications from various people about the provision of sweaters for the Northern Ireland police service. I asked how many were ordered for the RUC, and when, and received a rather interesting reply:

"No sweaters marked NI Police Service have been procured for issue to the Royal Ulster Constabulary."—[*Official Report*, 19 November 1998; Vol. 319, c. *740*.]

The reference to the Northern Ireland police service and the RUC in the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 seems to concern ancillary bodies, office personnel, and so on. I doubt whether receptionists will be wearing sweaters marked "Northern Ireland Police Service". Have we been spending money wisely, or are we repeating the folly of the past, when we insulted a proud force of men and women who served their country faithfully? Admittedly, there are those who have overstepped the mark due to pressure, but I am not defending them. I am speaking of the force collectively. Are we to insult them as we did with the previous attempted reform, when tailored uniforms were designated for change and second-hand blue uniforms were sent from England? The House should consider more the needs of the people of Northern Ireland and those who serve them—not the terrorists who plague them—before we adjourn for Christmas.

There is a concerted campaign, headed by Sinn Fein, to discredit the RUC. In an attempt to help people in Belfast at this busy time of year, when people are Christmas shopping and there is much ancillary pilfering, the RUC has opened a cop shop in the middle of a shopping area. Did Sinn Fein welcome it? No. That may be due to a guilt complex; we recall that it murdered people in the area when that shopping complex was built. Sinn Fein's protest at the open door through which people can go to meet the police in the service of the community impeded people's shopping.

Mr. Ross: Does my hon. Friend agree that the Patten commission has turned into about the most divisive device in the police force and in Northern Ireland politics for a good many months? I would not say for longer, because there are always divisive influences. Is it not evident from remarkably large attendances at meetings in every part of the Province that there is immense resentment among the law-abiding community—the 80 per cent. of those who support the police in Northern Ireland—at any interference with the force's ethos?

Rev. Martin Smyth: My hon. Friend has made a valid point. I am aware of the concerted attempts from different

angles to discredit the force, although the bulk of people stand by it. One recognises that the vocal minority does not represent the 80 per cent. of people who certainly support the police service.

It is naive to allege, despite the Patten commission's denial, that a document has not already been prepared. Anyone who has been in this place for years knows that people are beavering away writing papers which will ultimately be put before the chairman for his consideration and marks. Vehement protests that such things do not happen devalue the system.

11.4 am

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): I congratulate hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) on his well-deserved appointment as Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office. It gives hope to us all. I have always considered him an element of the awkward squad—not that his awkwardness is deliberate. He is often diplomatic, and it is good to see that someone does not have to tow the line all the time in order to be promoted under new Labour. In saying that, I hope that I have not damaged his career on the Front Bench.

It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth), as I did in the debate on the Queen's Speech. I would dearly like to pursue many of his points, but I shall content myself with a few short comments because I want to spend time on a constituency matter. I should point out, however, as I did when I followed the hon. Gentleman's previous speech, that a report of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee on the Royal Ulster Constabulary certainly does not downgrade the organisation. Such a document should be given serious consideration in the current review.

I was pleased with the remarks of the hon. Member for Belfast, South on intimidation, terror and exile in Northern Ireland. I have stated that, in association with Families Against Intimidation and Terror, I am willing to table a series of early-day motions on incident after incident, as they have occurred, so that the House is alerted to what is happening in Northern Ireland despite the ceasefire and the pursuance of a peace process. Often, a terrorist organisation seriously attacks its own community to bring it into line.

I wish to raise the matter of Avenue cokeworks in Wingerworth in my constituency. Unfortunately, I have to keep finding opportunities to raise matters of contamination and pollution in north-east Derbyshire. The following issue is another key incident that must be raised before we adjourn for Christmas because developments may occur very early in the new year.

The Avenue cokeworks plant was closed almost six years ago, with the loss of 313 jobs in Coal Products Ltd., save for one or two people who found work elsewhere in the company. The plant stands derelict on highly contaminated land. If one puts a stick in the River Rother, which runs by the plant, tar and oil bubble up. The plant is clearly an eyesore, which must be tackled.

For five years before the plant's closure, when I was a Member of the House, it was a source of serious pollution. Oven doors fitted badly, for instance, and I received numerous complaints about the plant's operation. I pressed a host of authorities for improvement. In fact, I pressed the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean), who was then the Minister responsible for the environment and the countryside, for assistance in modernisation in an attempt not only to save jobs, but to ensure decent production standards. At that time, the previous Government were getting around to setting up an independent environment agency, and there was hope that it would be strong and provide an opportunity for such a problem to be tackled. Nevertheless, the plant was closed because of low-quality output and a decline in the market for coal products.

A proposal to opencast the site and some of the surrounding area and to move the contaminated land into a waste cell made available by opencasting eventually emerged, and was put to Derbyshire county council for planning permission. There was opposition to the proposal from North East Derbyshire district council, parish councils, residents, environmental groups, which are very strong in the area, and me. I submitted my formal opposition in July 1995, even though the applicant, Fitzwise, is based in my constituency. The firm now operates as Tawnywood Ltd and Tawnywood (Avenue) Ltd in connection with the project.

Unfortunately, Derbyshire county council accepted the application. The issue is probably the biggest dispute that I have had with the council. The matter of Derbyshire county council was raised by the hon. Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin). On the subject of the council's grant and problems of capping, I have always been a solid advocate on the council's behalf, so in the present matter it was not a case of the council scratching my back because I had scratched its back, as it rejected the line that I had taken.

Let us consider the arguments that are still pressed vigorously against the Fitzwise-Tawnywood plan. Opencasting will harm the neighbouring communities of Grassmoor and Wingerworth. Grassmoor directly overlooks the plant and will overlook the opencasting activities. Those communities and surrounding areas will be seriously disrupted as coal is moved by road, although a main railway line runs through the centre of the site. It would be easy to use rail facilities to move the coal, but that is not part of the proposal. Few communal benefits will come from the development, apart from the cleaning up of the site, which needs to be done in any case, and the addition of a road and some trees.

More serious than the problem of opencasting is the problem of contaminated land. There is grave concern that methods employed to move contaminated land to the waste cell will involve considerable health risks for the community. The Avenue site is acknowledged by its current owners, English Partnerships, to be the most contaminated in its portfolio of 50 sites throughout the country, with the exception of the Greenwich millennium site.

There are high levels of benzene at the Avenue site. I shall quote from a report produced by John Gower, whose views I respect greatly, on behalf of Communities Opposed to Environmental Pollution. He states:

"there are a minimum of 23 types of carcinogenic chemicals on this site and their cumulative effect on health pose a major risk both to communities around the site and the work force who are to undertake the reclamation scheme."

He continues:

"The levels of volatile organic compounds . . . pose a most serious threat to health if disturbed, with levels reaching 41 times the safety thresholds in soil and 51 times in water. At locations on this site,

levels of benzene have been found at 240 ppm. Benzene can cause leukaemia and chronic blood disorders, and levels at less than 1 ppm are known to cause serious health effects."

Mr. Gower goes on to outline the problems associated with dioxins and PCBs—polychlorinated biphenyls—and later states:

"Other nasty chemicals including arsenic, cyanide, phenols, cadmium and nickel are known to cause asthma, respiratory illness, cancers and birth abnormalities and levels of very small particulates smaller than PM 2.5 enter the bloodstream through inhalation and cause heart disease and cancers."

Indeed, there is considerable evidence of the existence of a cancer cluster in the Wingerworth area from the time that the plant was in operation. I am dealing with the case of a local worker who died at the age of 37. It is the most serious case among the massive cancer problems that have occurred in the area. His wife believes, and the evidence suggests, that his work at the plant was the source of the cancer. The situation is similar to that reported in 1997 by the director of public health in Wales with reference to a plant in the Cynon valley. That was a valuable report, with implications for the situation in Derbyshire.

Can the Fitzwise-Tawnywood plan still be replaced? Even if the plan was abandoned, English Partnerships, which owns the site, has a statutory responsibility to clean it up, possibly by using bio-remedial techniques rather than opencasting. Even though Fitzwise has planning permission, various conditions must still be fulfilled. Is Fitzwise-Tawnywood financially viable, with safe insurance to cover its operations? Fitzwise was a subsidiary of NSM Mining, which went into liquidation in 1998.

If pumping stops at the former Williamthorpe colliery, that will cause problems in the water table in the area. It is suggested by Tawnywood that an adjustment is required to the planning permission to allow the use of landfill and sub-surface deposits to prevent contamination of the ground water. I am pressing Derbyshire county council to treat this as a new application, so that planning assessments must start from scratch and the situation can be re-examined in the light of new developments. Manpower planning guidance note 3, drafted by the appropriate Ministry, toughens up the conditions for opencasting. I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood will keep the relevant Minister informed of my views.

A remedial method statement prepared for English Partnerships by Scott Wilson Fitzpatrick in February 1998 has recently been agreed to by the statutory regulators, although many of us are unhappy about elements of it. Likewise, discharge consents for opencast working have been issued by the Environment Agency. Derbyshire county council has accepted a submission from the Environment Agency of intent to issue the waste management licence, so work could begin soon. However, there has not yet been an application for tar treatment on the site, as required.

The Environment Agency, the Health and Safety Executive, the health authorities and the planning authorities have agreed to demolish the chimneys by remote detonation. Given the known presence of dioxins in the chimneys, many of us are worried that the work will go ahead quickly, whereas considerable safety action is needed first to protect the community and the work force. There is also great concern about the asbestos remaining in the ovens when that dismantling takes place. Safety plans for the demolition work are vital.

Attempts have been made by Tawnywood to bounce the authorities into accepting an early start to work on the site. A great deal of money is involved. A working programme starting on 4 January is being circulated. I am keen to block that, especially as the original planning application states that no soil handling can take place between October and April because of the weather, unless such work is approved in writing by the Mineral Planning Authority. I hope that the authority will not be persuaded that work can begin as early as 4 January.

I have played another card by asking the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning to call in the planning agreement and examine it because of the new developments under the draft MPG 3. If that had been in place when Derbyshire county council considered the original application, the council would have been obliged to refuse it. I have used the same card before with the previous Government, but I hope that this time, unlike the previous occasion, I will get a sympathetic response, especially in the light of MPG 3.

Everything has been done that could have been done in an attempt to resolve the situation in respect of the site. I first met English Partnerships on these matters in January 1997, and have since regularly chaired an English Partnerships liaison group concerning Avenue cokeworks, made up of what might be described as the two sides in the argument. On one side are English Partnerships and Scott Wilson Fitzpatrick, which obviously are keen to have things developed and for the work to be done according to the plans that they want. On the other are councillors, environmental groups, myself and other interests, which think that the matter should be dealt with differently.

The secretary of that group is John Gower, whose work on these matters is invaluable. I want the site cleared as quickly as possible, but only by the safest possible method. That would be best resolved through call-in of the planning application by my hon. Friend the Minister. It would be valuable if he agreed to meet a deputation of the people who have these concerns to pursue the matter further—perhaps before he makes a decision that may go against us—so that we can argue as strongly as we can about the seriousness of the situation.

Unfortunately, Avenue cokeworks is not alone in north-east Derbyshire in presenting problems. In a previous debate, I discussed the situation at SARP Killamarsh, which has considerable problems, and we always have to keep a look out for developments at Staveley Chemicals, which has an emergency plan operating in the area. Opencasting is always a tremendous issue in the constituency and in the district.

Hon. Members would not think that an area with so many such problems because of industrial development would be at the bottom end of the Government's standard spending assessments. That needs to be looked at, but I shall venture down that path on some other occasion.

11.22 am

Mr. Alan Clark (Kensington and Chelsea): In congratulating the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, on his elevation, I also commiserate with him on having landed feet first in a pretty tough, broad-spectrum assignment. We have heard a number of extremely interesting contributions, many of which deserve a full, considered response.

I intend to draw the attention of the House—it will not be difficult—to another case where the Government have not fulfilled their manifesto commitment. In 1996, the year before the election, a paper entitled "New Labour: New Life for Animals" was published. Animals do not have a vote, but there is a lobby—not the activists, but a general aura of sympathy—that disapproves of abuse and of cruelty. That feeling is widespread in the electorate and, if it had not been, the Labour party would not have bothered to compose and publish a paper.

The essential premise of the paper was the promise of support for a royal commission on the justification and effectiveness of experiments on animals. That promise was repeated in the manifesto on which the Labour party was elected. Others have drawn attention to the failure to fulfil that promise, although it is no part of my intention to advocate the devices in which those hyper-enthusiasts—to give them a polite term—have and are indulging in. As hon. Members know, someone in prison at present has been starving himself for many days. That is evidence of the high degree of commitment—the House must accept this—that pervades certain sections of society on the issue.

I do not know whether other hon. Members saw "Dispatches" on television about 10 days ago. It used its standard technique of infiltration and betrayal of the trust that the infiltrator had acquired. There was selected editing, cutting and presenting, and a totally biased image was produced, focusing on individuals who, admittedly, probably would not shrink from breaking the law. The programme, however, did not bother to say that those people are the very tip of an iceberg of a large number of well-intentioned and genuinely concerned individuals.

We were told that the royal commission would be ineffectual because it would be expensive, cumbersome and time consuming. I detect in that—and so will the Minister quite quickly, if he does not think that impertinent—the language of the civil service. It will have put before him reasons for not doing anything. A royal commission probably would be inconvenient, time consuming and troublesome for the Government, but there is also a risk that, if it discharged its duties properly, it would conclude that a large tranche of animal experiments are repetitious, cruel, unnecessary and indifferently supervised in the various and scattered laboratories where they take place, and that an enormous proportion are still being conducted purely for the commercial gain and profits of a large number of powerful corporations—or even multinational corporations—in the private sector.

I hope that the Government will think again. I recognise that that would be difficult for them in the atmosphere that is being created, where the temperature is being raised in some quarters and they find themselves under the kind of pressure that we—who are democratically legitimate in this place—should never either bow to or endorse. None the less, it would be a fine gesture if they admitted that a royal commission is necessary, that there is substantial public demand for that and that they committed themselves to it in their manifesto.

I shall conclude by quoting one of our leading essayists, who wrote recently:

"Passionate belief in the rights of animals may seem quirky and extreme".

I have had no diffidence about admitting to being an animal freak throughout my political career, and I made my maiden speech many years ago in support of a Bill introduced by the hon. Member for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara). In my brief period away from this place, I was behaving as I could not behave once I was again a Member of Parliament—going to animal rights protesters' funerals, going on picket lines and so on.

The essayist continued:

"passionate belief in our responsibilities to and for them, whether in laboratories, battery sheds, farrowing stalls, milking parlours, in transit by road and sea, in abattoir, Islamic slaughter-house or farmyard should inform the judgment and behaviour of all men and women who lay claim to reason and compassion."

11.29 am

Mr. John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington): I apologise for my delayed entry into the Chamber. There was gridlock in west London this morning and I was on the school run.

I congratulate the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping), on his appointment. My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) caught in him a whiff of the awkward squad. I see less of that and more the sinew of principle. I am sure that he will serve us well in government.

Before we enter the Christmas recess, I want to raise briefly two injustices. First, I draw attention to the plight of my constituents who, for the past three years, have been in dispute with Hillingdon hospital, and who, this year, will be on the picket line for their fourth Christmas. The dispute involves Hillingdon hospital cleaners, which some will recall I raised previously.

More than three years ago, the cleaning service was privatised, and the company that took over the contract was Pall Mall, which immediately introduced a substantial reduction in wages, eradicated certain conditions of service and refused to negotiate. As a result, the cleaners, largely Asian women, were forced to take industrial action. Throughout, Pall Mall refused to negotiate. Now, after three years, the Hillingdon Asian women strikers have won the right to reinstatement and full compensation at an industrial tribunal.

Unfortunately, the new company which took over from Pall Mall, Granada, refused to implement the industrial tribunal's decision. That means, as I have said, that this Christmas the strikers will once again be out in the cold on the picket line. The women have lived off donations, not social security benefits, and limited strike pay for nearly four years.

As a result of that experience, we should consider our industrial relations legislation and the worst offenders. The fairness at work programme that the Government are introducing will overcome many of the problems that we have seen in past industrial disputes—

Mr. Alan Clark: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way, particularly as I have just finished speaking on a completely different subject. Does he agree that a strange anomaly is present in Granada, which is a great supporter of the Labour party, which he represents, yet displays a particular expertise in ripping off the consumer and abusing its work force whenever it suits it?

Mr. McDonnell: I am surprised at the way in which Granada is treating these women. We hoped that, when Granada took over the contract from Pall Mall, it would

[Mr. McDonnell]

see sense, settle the dispute amicably, reinstate the women and provide compensation. A representative from Granada has been appointed to the Government's Low Pay Commission. For that reason, we hoped that the dispute would be resolved amicably, but that has not happened.

It is with extreme disappointment that we now find that Granada is seeking to challenge the industrial tribunal's decision and to overturn, not necessarily the compensation order, but the reinstatement order. It is on the principle of reinstatement that the women have stood for three and a half long years.

As we debate the new legislation, we need to ensure that we design it so that it tackles the worst employers, rather than just ensuring that we have standards for the average employer to abide by. We must consider the hard cases.

The second injustice which I want briefly to mention has already been referred to the House on a number of occasions, most recently by the hon. Member for Beckenham (Mrs. Lait) and the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey). It relates again to the Inntrepreneur cases. I have in my constituency a Mr. and Mrs. Luke, the landlord and landlady of the Crown public house in the beautiful village of Harmondsworth, one of the last lovely villages around Heathrow. They took over the pub 11 years ago and have run it successfully ever since. Their original lease was with Courage breweries.

Mr. and Mrs. Luke agreed a business plan for the pub on the basis of a five-year lease, plus a five-year continuing lease, with a contract to sell a certain barrelage. During the past 11 years, Mr. and Mrs. Luke have worked hard. They have invested their own money in the pub. They have an excellent new kitchen, serve food, have increased their clientele and have been in the "Good Beer Guide" for the past 10 years. For Mr. and Mrs. Luke, this was their investment for retirement which they plan in the next five or seven years.

Inntrepreneur took over the contracts and leases from Courage breweries and immediately increased the barrelage and renegotiated the contract on an unrealistic level, a process which has occurred in many constituencies. As a result, an impossible demand has been placed on Mr. and Mrs. Luke. The lease and rent prices have been forced upwards, again to an unrealistic level, and the company's response to an attempt to negotiate a reasonable level which could be expected from the pub is, "If you don't like it, walk away and leave the keys."

Mr. and Mrs. Luke now face the loss of their pub, their investment, their retirement nest egg and their home shortly after Christmas. This is a tragic story. There will be no room at the inn for Mr. and Mrs. Luke after Christmas. They will be evicted.

Inntrepreneur is now part of the Nomura bank, which is going further in ensuring that the barrelage rates for other landlords are forced up even higher and the renegotiated terms inflict more damage on individual pubs. In addition, it refuses to renegotiate sensible rates at a sustainable level.

That action stems from earlier legislation which was an attempt to break down the breweries' monopolies under the previous Government. That was well intended, but it had these unforeseen consequences which have affected many constituencies. Action needs to be taken to review the legislation and to protect constituents such as mine, Mr. and Mrs. Luke, who are about to lose their homes.

11.36 am

Mr. Peter Viggers (Gosport): I urge that the House should not adjourn until it has had an opportunity to consider the position of the defence medical services, particularly the royal hospital, Haslar, in my constituency.

It is common ground that there are shortages in the defence medical services. It is much under strength in terms of doctors, nurses and other staff. I am convinced that the fortunate circumstances of the Falklands war, where there were fewer casualties than was generally expected—some 250 or so—and certainly the Iraq-Kuwait war, where, mercifully, the number of casualties was small, meant that those who urged that defence medical services should be strengthened and maintained at a good level were defeated by those putting forward Treasury-type arguments, who pointed out that the defence forces might not need the strength of medical services that had previously been needed. I am convinced that that is wrong and that medicine is an essential part of our defence forces.

The study under the previous Government's programme, "Front Line First", was carried out under the heading "Defence Costs Study 15"—the study of defence medical services. That concluded that there should be a single tri-service defence hospital at Haslar. That decision was taken in 1994. It was an integral part of that decision that Haslar should be increased in size to 375 beds and that all the other services should be increased commensurately.

As part of that overall programme, some £35 million has been spent over the past 10 years. Haslar has some exemplary facilities. It has an outstandingly well-equipped burns unit which, because the Government have not carried through the programme to expand Haslar as was originally intended, despite its excellent facilities, has not yet been opened. Only now has an arrangement been reached with the burns unit at Odstock hospital near Salisbury. It is hoped that the burns unit at Haslar will soon be opened.

Haslar has the only hyperbaric unit in the area. It has a helicopter landing facility, which is helpful in cases of air-sea rescue and when casualties need to be moved quickly. Haslar deals with about 110,000 patients a year, of whom 80 per cent. are civilians. When I visited Haslar a month ago, instead of the intended 375 beds under "Defence Costs Study 15", I found only 187 beds were manned. There are severe staff shortages.

The Government's publication this week of a document entitled "Defence Medical Services: a strategy for the future" reveals that the armed forces have only 50 per cent. of the doctors that they need for establishment and only 75 per cent. of the nurses. There are similar shortages across the defence medical services.

So serious is the situation that there is a defence requirement that the Regular Army should be able to have four field hospitals, and that the Territorial Army should be able to have 11 field hospitals. However, in the whole of the Army, there are only four orthopaedic surgeons. It would therefore be impossible, because of a shortage of medical staff, for the armed forces to deploy at proper strength. It is a deeply serious problem.

Proposals to close Haslar are being made at a time when the medical environment has been changing. Fashions in medicine have changed. Five or so years ago, the view was that a district general hospital could be sustained by a hinterland population of about 250,000 people, whereas the latest thinking is that a district general hospital requires a hinterland population of about 500,000. There has also been increasing sub-specialisation within the royal colleges. Decisions on the future have had to be made within that context.

The Government have considered the shortages within the defence medical services. I ask the House to consider the chain of logic that Ministers have followed in dealing with the shortages. First, they spelled out the degree of the shortages and the size of the problem. Subsequently, they concluded that they should close the only tri-service hospital. Surely it does not take a rocket scientist or a brain surgeon—it takes someone with O-level common sense—to realise that, when there are already acknowledged shortages, it cannot make sense to close the only hospital.

The Government's strategy is to open two medical district hospital units—one at Northallerton, to take over from Catterick hospital, and another perhaps at Cosham, in Hampshire, which will provide facilities for military specialists within a civilian hospital. The Government's overall strategy is that there should be one centre of medical excellence—which they have yet to define.

It simply cannot make sense to seek a centre for medical excellence when such a centre was already selected and chosen in 1994. Haslar is that centre of medical excellence. The college of military medicine was moved to Haslar to be adjacent to Haslar hospital. The Institute of Naval Medicine is near to Haslar hospital. There is the centre of medical excellence.

I tell the House—from my absolute conviction and from talking to many nurses, doctors and other medical staff at Haslar—that, if the Government press ahead with the insane scheme to close Haslar and to find another hospital to become the centre of medical excellence and cannot make an absolute, firm and long-term commitment to Haslar, Haslar's staff will leave. Doctors, nurses and other medical staff have very transferable skills. In recent months, many staff—scores of them—at Haslar have told me that they simply are not prepared to stay in an environment unless the future of that environment can be confirmed to them.

I really do believe—although initially I thought that the point, when it was put to me, was extreme and over-excited—that the defence medical services will collapse inwards and implode if the future of Haslar hospital cannot be confirmed. We would find ourselves facing a serious crisis in which our armed forces cannot deploy because there is not the medical staff to back them up.

So far, I have spoken entirely on the basis of the national military medicine crisis. However, Haslar hospital is in my constituency, and there are also some civilian aspects of the problem, about which my constituents feel very strongly.

This week, I was given a categorical assurance by a Minister. He said, "If we do close Haslar, I can give you my absolute assurance that medical facilities on the Gosport peninsula will not be diminished in any way." I shall not name the Minister, because the assurance was such transparent rubbish that it would shame him if I were to name him.

Facilities in the Gosport peninsula will, of course, be closed if Haslar hospital—which is effectively the district general hospital—is closed, and of course medical facilities will be affected. How can anyone expect medical facilities in the Gosport peninsula not to be affected by the closure of a hospital that deals with 110,000 patients a year, 80 per cent. of whom are civilians, and on which doctors in the Gosport area rely greatly? It is absolutely preposterous and total nonsense to suggest that there would not be such an effect.

The immediate leading edge of the damage that would be done to medical facilities in the Gosport peninsula is in accident and emergency cover. Haslar hospital has the only accident and emergency cover in the Gosport peninsula, backed up—as it should be—by intensive care units, anaesthetists and all the other specialists necessary for intensive care.

I should say, to my regret, that particularly the A32 road between Gosport and Fareham, but also the road between Fareham and Cosham, can become blocked, and that traffic on them moves extremely slowly for over two hours every morning and for over two hours every evening. My constituents are deeply concerned that—with a lack of accident and emergency cover in Haslar—they would have to be transported to Cosham hospital, as it would not be possible to create in Gosport a free-standing accident and emergency unit, as such units have to be part of a major hospital. My constituents suffering any accident or emergency would therefore have to sit in heavy traffic. They are deeply concerned that the delay between collection by ambulance and arrival in hospital could have serious consequences, and possibly cause loss of life.

The idea that medical facilities in the Gosport peninsula will not be affected by closure of its major hospital leaves me speechless. I cannot imagine what the Minister had in mind. Was he thinking perhaps of providing a fleet of helicopters?

I believe that Haslar hospital will not close. Many people have asked me what they can do to ensure that it does not close. Certainly, we are doing everything that we can to enable them to demonstrate the strength of their feeling. We are planning a public rally and march on Sunday 24 January, at 12 noon, when I hope that many people will go from Gosport town hall to Haslar hospital to hand in a petition against the closure of Haslar hospital.

I believe that Haslar hospital will stay open, not because of what will undoubtedly be a very widespread demonstration of support for it in the Gosport peninsula, but because the proposed closure will be overtaken by events. Ministers will discover—it will be demonstrated to them—what has been said to me by many constituents and by many doctors and nurses working in Haslar hospital: unless a firm commitment is given on the hospital's future, doctors, nurses and other medical staff will leave. Therefore, within two years Haslar would close and, consequently, the situation within the defence medical services would be catastrophic.

The Government have to do something about the situation. I am convinced that they have to give the assurance that I am demanding—that Haslar be kept open.

11.47 am

Mr. David Amess (Southend, West): Before adjourning for the Christmas recess, there are four points that I wish to raise. However, before doing so I should like to join other hon. Members in congratulating the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) on his appointment. He may recall that when he was Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Home Secretary, he very generously invited me to a pre-Question Time briefing, thereby demonstrating that he is an inclusive politician. I shall watch his future career with great interest.

The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) is in the Chamber. His arguments for independence were totally unconvincing. Independence is a little like running with the foxes and hunting with the hounds. Both nationally and locally, it is a bit of a cop out. There is one well-established party that those who call themselves independent may join—it is called the Liberal Democrat party or the Literal Democrat Party. Nevertheless, I wish him well in his attempt to persuade the House's authorities that his own party should be recognised.

The first point that I should like to deal with is the Palace theatre, in Westcliff.

Mr. Viggers: Again.

Mr. Amess: Yes, again.

As we move towards Christmas, we think of pantomimes and of the Government. The Palace theatre will be inviting people to watch its latest production—a Christmas production of "Peter Pan". However, unless the Government accept responsibility for something, there will not be another Christmas pantomime at the Palace theatre. The trust board has announced that the Palace theatre will be closing in the spring and that its 42 staff will be made redundant because of a lack of funding. I have raised the issue before with Ministers, but they claim that they are not responsible and it is all down to the Eastern arts board.

I am not putting up with this. We need grown-up politics. The Department for Culture, Media and Sport has some responsibility. It is not acceptable to say that it is all down to how much the Eastern arts board allocates. I should like the Minister to have a word with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to ask for fair treatment. When the Wolsey theatre in Ipswich gets £322,750, the Mercury theatre in Colchester gets £230,000 and the Palace theatre in Watford gets £204,000, it is not fair that we get £45,000. Our magnificent theatre was given to Southend at the start of the century so that children, women and men could enjoy productions there.

We are not being well served by the Government or the Eastern arts board. I support the Southend arts council in its endeavours to ensure fair treatment. I had a meeting with the chief executive of the Eastern arts board and his sidekick about a year ago. There has been some criticism of the management of the theatre for not putting on sufficiently adventurous productions. When the Palace theatre puts on so-called adventurous productions, not enough people turn up. When it puts on perhaps rather more down-market, popular productions, the place is sold out. The theatre seems to be doing the bidding of the Eastern arts board, yet one local production lost £50,000.

The Minister may not be able to give an intelligent answer in the time available, but if he is not able to say anything to me this morning, perhaps he will ask his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State to write to me. I shall not remain silent on the issue. I do not blame the trust, which was under the superb leadership of Mr. Albert Reddihough, who devoted 12 years to the theatre. I do not blame the council. I am supporting the local community. We all understand that the arts have to be subsidised in some way. Compared with the amount of money being pumped into other theatres, our £45,000 is not fair.

My second point is on exclusion. Someone said to me the other day, "You can love your children, but you do not necessarily have to like them." We all know that children can break our hearts, but I am worried about the growing popularity of excluding children from school—not just secondary schools, but junior and infant schools. I am sure that I am not imagining the trend, given the number of parents making representations to me.

Before Labour Members groan, I should like to point out that I was here when we had a vote on the retention of corporal punishment. That vote was lost by one. I do not intend to rewrite history, but I believe that it was a mistake. It is difficult for teachers today. They can no longer resort to corporal punishment. They try to persuade children. We all know about the assaults that have taken place and the stress that teachers are under, but too many children are being excluded. They are eventually expelled, people are sent in to try to educate them at home, they all gather together and they are condemned to a life of failure. Is it any wonder that the peak age of offending is 15, given how we are treating children?

Under the new Government, we live in a land of milk and honey with apple pie and all of that. What is the Government's answer to exclusion? Many schools are cute, going for a fixed-term exclusion of up to 14 days. Parents may ask for an appeal, but when the governors meet, usually in a panel of three, they inevitably support the head teacher. The increasing popularity of exclusion is not good enough. I hope that the Minister will pass on my remarks to his right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment.

My third point is about the millennium dome. It is a disgrace. I could not care less if the Conservative Government thought up the idea. I was never consulted and there was never a vote in the House on it. It is a ridiculous project that the Labour Government have not only continued to support, but enhanced. A few weeks ago I visited the millennium dome. I make no criticism of the people who escorted me round the site. I was treated extremely well. In case there are any hon. Members who have not yet been there, I can tell them that it is a huge circus tent. When Big Ben strikes 12 and the year 2000 arrives, 10,000 invited guests—I realise that I shall not be one of them—will be asked to watch a circus. That is supposed to be how we celebrate the millennium.

All the talk about the project being behind schedule is rubbish. The 14 exhibition areas are all on time. I think that three of them have been handed over. It is no longer a temporary site, but a permanent one. I have no argument with it being at Greenwich because of the meridian, but anyone who knows London as I do realises that people cannot travel easily in Greenwich by car. The millennium dome is built over the Blackwall tunnel. The air vent even comes up in the middle of the dome. I am told that 12 million people will visit in the first year and will get

there on the Jubilee line. We all know what happened when a Minister gave evidence to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee last week. We are told that 35 trains will bring people in to see the millennium dome. That is cloud cuckoo land. Apparently, a few people will travel on water—a new jetty is being built—but the projections are implausible.

Never mind about the Pompidou building, we have the dreadful Lloyds building and other horrendous buildings, yet we have allowed the same architect to indulge himself further with the millennium dome. It is an ugly building. I bitterly resent the idea that future generations will feel that Members of Parliament enthusiastically agreed that it would be a good way to celebrate the year 2000. I think of the beauty of the Palace of Westminster and magnificent buildings such as St. Paul's. If we had to have a building, it certainly should not have been the millennium dome.

While I am on the subject, Southend has not had a penny to celebrate the millennium. With the huge amount of talent that we have, we shall celebrate it in a fitting way, but not with the millennium dome.

My final point is about the increasing Americanisation of this country and the Government. I have always been pro-America and Americans, but I am sick to death of America at the moment. For the President of the United States of America to lie to the grand jury and the American people and then be rewarded with a net gain of five congressional seats says a great deal about contemporary American culture. A British Prime Minister could not get away with such behaviour. I am talking not about sex, but about the suicides over Whitewater and other issues. Yet the leader of the Labour party could not be closer to the President of the United States of America. Consider his agreement with the bombing of Sudan and Afghanistan. When Labour Members did not like the sinking of the Belgrano, we heard about it day in, day out, but they have said not a word about Sudan and Afghanistan. We are deeply damaged by the association of the British Prime Minister with the American President.

I am sick to death of the Government's glitz and the rubbish that they talk about the Post Office, pensions and social security. They have no original ideas, only rhetoric and glitz. In joining other hon. Members in wishing the House a very happy Christmas, my hope for the millennium is that the Government are replaced by a decent Conservative Government.

12 noon

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): None of us would disagree with some of the concluding words of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West (Mr. Amess). Indeed, some of us emphatically agree with him about the replacement of the Government. It is rather good to end the debate with a typical bravura performance from my hon. Friend, who participates in every one of these debates. We have heard about the Palace theatre at Westcliff at least twice. Although I wish him every success in getting money for the theatre—and he makes his cause passionately and eloquently—if by any sad chance the theatre closes and there is no pantomime next year, his constituents have only to come to the Strangers Gallery to be suitably entertained.

I should also stress that my hon. Friend's views on the United States do not represent official Conservative party policy, nor do his views on the millennium dome. Although he made some interesting comments, he slightly over-exaggerated the transport problem. If the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State wish to go to the dome, they have only to walk on the water to get there.

I warmly congratulate the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office, the hon. Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) on his appointment. When I walked into the Chamber this morning shortly before Prayers, I had no idea that he would be replying to the debate. He has been suitably rewarded with a ministerial post and I wish him long life and happiness in it. This morning he has the opportunity to answer his hon. Friends and Opposition Members with positive assurances in the certain knowledge that he can give a ministerial commitment but cannot be sacked within 24 hours of being appointed. So I look forward to assurances on picket lines, hospitals and everything else that hon. Members have requested.

Today's debate is one of the highlights of the parliamentary calender. It happens three or four times a year and it is an institution that I hope no Modernisation Committee will ever sweep away as it provides an opportunity for hon. Members on both sides of the House to raise a range of subjects.

This morning we began with a speech from the hon. Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox), who is a regular participant in these debates. This time he did not plead for peace in Cyprus, which was the subject of his previous offering, but underlined the acute concern felt by all hon. Members at the deplorable cases of child cruelty that have occupied so much space in the newspapers recently. He pointed to one or two particularly tragic cases and used his experience as a local councillor to underline how critical it is that the services responsible for ministering to those poor unfortunate children get their act together in a more co-ordinated and sensible manner.

My hon. Friend the Member for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) highlighted a particular case in his constituency involving the difficulties faced by children and their grandparents who have to bring them up because of their mother's drug addiction. Quite rightly, my hon. Friend did not mention the names of the people concerned, but spoke quietly and eloquently about their plight. I hope that the Minister will respond positively to the concerns that he raised. My hon. Friend could not resist referring to the Government's capping of Derbyshire county council and made a trenchant point most effectively.

The hon. Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore) made a commendably—and unusually—brief speech. He made only one point: that the Government should honour their commitment on freedom of information and produce a substantive Bill at the earliest possible date. Bearing in mind all the work that was done by the previous Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, it should not be beyond the wit of the Government to do that. Let us hope that the hon. Gentleman's plea has been heeded. Of course we should want to examine such a Bill with great care and my commending his speech should not be taken as a blanket assurance that we will agree with every particular in the Bill. Nevertheless, we would like such a Bill. It was promised to us and we wish to debate it thoroughly.

The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) made a commendably brief and most eloquent speech about the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998 and the peculiar

[Sir Patrick Cormack]

anomaly in which he finds himself as a result of that measure. I must say that I do not agree with the uncharacteristically churlish remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West about the hon. Member for Tatton, who in his brief time in the House has already illustrated the real value that an Independent Member can bring to our deliberations. Although I cannot guarantee that I will not campaign against him if he decides to stand in the next election—

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): It might help.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Indeed it might. Nevertheless, the hon. Member for Tatton has enlivened our debates and brings a degree of dispassionate commitment to the subjects that we discuss. This morning he made a valid point that should be taken on board—indeed, it was taken on board by the Opposition during the passage of the Bill.

The hon. Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) spoke about the north-west, emphasising housing and transport needs. I associate myself absolutely with his plea for the west coast main line that goes through my constituency. It is crucial that it is upgraded as soon as possible. Of course I cannot do the same in respect of his plea for regional government. It came a little quaintly from the hon. Gentleman, who always looks so benign. One expects him to be speaking for the north-west of Scotland, but of course he represents the north-west of England and is himself a wonderful example of the value and virtue of the United Kingdom that is so menaced by devolution and would be further threatened by regional government.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) made an omnibus speech in which he raised four topics. He talked about the channel tunnel rail link and seems to suspect a manipulative coalition between the Government and Railtrack. It would be unfair to expect them today from the Minister, but I hope that we shall have some reassurances in a detailed letter from the Deputy Prime Minister to my hon. Friend, dispelling his conspiracy theory.

My hon. Friend also spoke about the fruit industry and some of the slightly strange practices of supermarkets. I was shocked by what he said about the supermarket trying to get the grower to give money to charity so that the supermarket could bask in reflected glory. I was even more disturbed by what he said about the fruit grower who found his so-called rejected strawberries being sold on the shelves. My right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) interjected from a sedentary position, "That is criminal". If that is happening it is indeed criminal and I hope that the fruit farmer in question follows the advice of his sage Member of Parliament.

My hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent also spoke about the problem caused by cheaper diesel fuel being available on the continent, particularly in France and Belgium, and he also made a short but powerful plea on behalf of the Kent and Canterbury hospital.

The hon. Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) talked about the fine historic buildings in his constituency. I have a great fellow feeling for him, although he was obviously a little embarrassed that a number of those buildings belonged to Harrow school, which received only a passing mention—one understands the political correctness that probably dictated that omission. As chairman of the all-party arts and heritage group, I entirely endorse his plea and what he said about the excellent work of English Heritage, both under its first chairman, Lord Montagu, and under its current chairman, Sir Jocelyn Stevens. I hope that Sir Jocelyn and Pam Alexander, the chief executive, will read and act on the hon. Gentleman's words.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) talked about the needs of the national health service in Northern Ireland, particularly the need to upgrade the ambulance service if what he called the golden six hospitals were to function effectively. He also spoke about the plight of children and those with learning difficulties. He made a powerful plea for the Royal Ulster Constabulary. It is right to salute the men and women of the RUC at Christmas, a season when they have had so many difficult tasks to perform—they have served with exemplary courage through some of the most difficult years in our nation's history.

The hon. Member for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes), who is another regular in these debates and has a commendable track record on Northern Ireland, is also an exemplary constituency Member of Parliament. He legitimately used this debate to make an appeal through the Parliamentary Secretary. I hope that his plea for a calling-in of the application that he mentioned will meet with some success.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Kensington and Chelsea is, if one had to categorise him, the most unlikely candidate for any picket line that one could imagine. He nevertheless explained why his quietly passionate concern for animals led him to join a picket line during his temporary sojourn—self-inflicted but soon regretted—from the House of Commons. He made a powerful plea for the Government to honour their manifesto commitment for a royal commission. Although he recognised the delicacy of the situation, he did not, if I may say so, underline the fact that the Government have a real problem with Mr. Horne, who is a criminal guilty of terrorist acts—the Government would have been entirely wrong to give the impression of bowing to demands. We must put on the record our view that those who commit criminal acts in any cause are not to be condoned.

The hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) made a plea for the cleaners of Hillingdon. I sincerely hope that Granada will heed what he said. He also talked feelingly about the licensee of a pub in Harmondsworth and his wife, whose life work is threatened by eviction. Let us hope that those responsible for that public house will heed what has been said this morning.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) talked about the parlous state of the Defence Medical Services. He made a plea for Haslar hospital to be saved. The hospital is of supreme importance, not only in the context of the defence medical services, but to his constituency. He, too, has a fine reputation as a constituency Member of Parliament and has great knowledge of defence matters. There can be few hon. Members who realised that there are only four orthopaedic surgeons in the Army or the significance of the hospital in whose defence he spoke so passionately. Although I cannot promise to join him on the march on,

I think, 24 January, I hope that many others will and that, even before then, the Government give him the assurances that he so rightly seeks.

I end where I began—with my hon. Friend the Member for Southend, West. He has an inimitable style and is always capable of entertaining the House. Whether he performs on the boards at Westcliff, in the dome or anywhere else, I am sure that he will always be able to raise a hearty laugh among his audience. That laugh will be affectionate, as he is a man without an ounce of malice, who has served the House and his constituents well.

That is a good note on which to end. I conclude by reiterating my congratulations to the hon. Member for Sherwood and by wishing you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and all hon. Members present a very happy Christmas.

12.15 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office (Mr. Paddy Tipping): I apologise for the fact that my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House cannot be with us today. She is involved in Privy Council business and, to my cost, I am at the Dispatch Box. I am grateful to hon. Members for their good wishes. The hon. Member for South Staffordshire (Sir P. Cormack) said that he was surprised to see me here, but I doubt whether he was half as surprised as I am. I have tried not to become a smooth man, as my hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch (Mr. Sedgemore) would say, and I believe that there is room in the House for a bit of sinew.

This has been an interesting debate on a number of themes. At Christmas, it is important that we talk about children, so it has been fascinating to hear how many times children's issues have been mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Mr. Cox) and the hon. Members for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) and for West Derbyshire (Mr. McLoughlin) all mentioned children. I agree that it is important to invest in children and in the future.

My hon. Friend the Member for Eccles (Mr. Stewart) used a word with which I am familiar—mithering. There has rightly been a good deal of mithering for hon. Members' constituents and community interests. The hon. Members for Gosport (Mr. Viggers) and for Southend, West (Mr. Amess) and my hon. Friends the Members for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) and for North-East Derbyshire (Mr. Barnes) all made effective cases for causes and concerns in their areas.

Thirteen hon. Members have had the opportunity to speak; they have raised a number of important issues. My hon. Friend the Member for Tooting took pole position yet again. I was delighted to hear his comments about the need to listen to children. Children often talk honestly; we should listen closely when they tell us things. The Government have set up a listening service for children and I hope that we will build on that work. I also hope that we will develop the "quality protects" programme announced on 21 September, which is investing an extra £375 million in residential services, so that we can give children in care a better deal. My hon. Friend is right to say that we should investigate any failures in the child care system and try to learn lessons for the future.

The hon. Member for West Derbyshire spoke movingly about a case in Derby. He was right to stress the importance, where it is possible, of family care so that children can keep in touch with their family of origin and remain involved in the community. He was sceptical about the attitude of the local social services department; I will ensure that his concerns are passed to the relevant Ministers and that there is some discussion with Derby social services. He mentioned an old favourite of his, Derbyshire county council, in which my hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire also takes a great interest. He referred to this year's budget, but I know from my own experience how delighted council leaders are with this year's settlement, which far exceeds anything that they received under the previous Government. I hope that that will be a foundation for the council to develop and build services in Derbyshire.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hackney, South and Shoreditch, in a short but effective speech, asked about the freedom of information Bill. I am delighted to reassure him that a draft Bill will be published early in the new year—towards the end of January, or perhaps into February—and there will be pre-legislative scrutiny. We propose legislation for the whole life of a Parliament, and my hon. Friend will have heeded the commitment of the Prime Minister to ensure that, during the lifetime of this Parliament, we will have a freedom of information Act. My hon. Friend also tried to tempt me into looking at MI6, but I will resist that temptation this morning.

The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) spoke about the effects of the Registration of Political Parties Act 1998, and their consequences for him. He is right to say that the word "Independent" cannot be registered—for example, "Independent Labour party" or "Independent Ratepayers party". However, it will still be possible for candidates such as the hon. Gentleman to describe themselves as Independent. One of the important parts of the new Act is a Committee of Members of this House, who will advise the registrar for political parties. I hope very much that the hon. Gentleman will pursue that route.

I have a feeling that the speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Eccles was a "Blue Peter" speech—one that he had prepared earlier. I know that he missed an opportunity to make this speech only a few days ago. People in Eccles are keen to make best use of their endeavours and not throw anything away. My hon. Friend made some important points about the need to set performance targets for regional development agencies and regional chambers. I agree that these are important new bodies which must be accountable and must deliver. I will draw the attention of ministerial colleagues to my hon. Friend's speech.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent (Mr. Rowe) made a number of points—all, save one, with a European theme. European influences have a great effect on his part of the country. I have known for a long time of his concerns about the channel tunnel rail link and the dereliction and blight caused in his area. I support him entirely in his view that we must ensure that both the first and second phases of the link are completed. The two phases are linked, and there will be consequences for Railtrack if they do not go forward.

Like the hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent, I come from a rural background and I do not underestimate the importance of the fruit industry. It is important that we look at the power of supermarkets, and he may know that the Office of Fair Trading is currently looking at supermarkets. I hope that it looks closely at

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pricing policies, and that it will come forward with proposals for us to buy British—to buy Kent fruit and British beef and meat.

The hon. Member for Faversham and Mid-Kent was keen to point out the difficulties that haulage operators in his area face in terms of fuel duty. That is a problem, but some of our rates of taxation are lower than those in other parts of the continent. He referred also to Kent and Canterbury hospital, a subject that is before Ministers. I know that his representations will be heard.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West spoke forcefully about the joys of Harrow. I entirely agree that we should encourage environmental initiatives and open spaces. I draw my hon. Friend's attention to Richard Rogers's task force on urban regeneration. Like my hon. Friend, I would like to see more greenery and open spaces in our urban areas.

The hon. Member for Belfast, South spoke movingly about the need to get away from "yah-boo politics" and get on with the real issues. He talked about the need to invest in the health service in Northern Ireland, the distances involved and the importance of making sure that services are close to local people.

I was particularly interested in the points that the hon. Member for Belfast, South made about the Royal Ulster Constabulary. It is important to put on record our respect for the work of the RUC. We must ensure also that it has the right equipment, and I do not believe that any police force should have second-hand equipment. However, police forces can learn from one another; just as the RUC can learn from the Met, I am sure that there are things that the Met can learn from the RUC.

My hon. Friend the Member for North-East Derbyshire mentioned the Avenue cokeworks, which I have had the opportunity of visiting. It is a difficult site, with many problems. I know of my hon. Friend's fight against opencasting, and he made a strong point about looking at bio-remediation measures, rather than dump-and-dispose measures, on that site. I know that he has met with Ministers and I will take up the case on his behalf.

The right hon. Member for Kensington and Chelsea (Mr. Clark) has a long-standing involvement in animal welfare issues, and talked about the Labour document, "New Labour: New Life for Animals". I must say that there was no manifesto commitment to a royal commission, but I am pleased to inform him that the notion of a royal commission has not been ruled out, and progress is being made. More inspectors have been appointed, there has been a ban on cosmetic testing on animals and there is a ban on testing animals in relation to alcohol and tobacco. A great deal needs to be done and we need to build on the work of the Animal Procedures Committee before moving to a final decision on a royal commission.

I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (Mr. McDonnell) said about the dispute. I believe that measures such as the minimum wage and the White Paper on fairness at work will provide the right balance.

The hon. Member for Gosport spoke strongly and with authority about the problems at Haslar hospital. I will ensure that his remarks are drawn to the attention of ministerial colleagues. I know that he gave a trailer for a demonstration on 24 March and I wish him and the demonstration well.

I will not be drawn on to the boards of the Palace theatre by the hon. Member for Southend, West.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Mr. Jack Straw): A fine place.

Mr. Tipping: A fine place, indeed.

Nor do I want to say much about the millennium dome, which will be a monument on which people can make a judgment for themselves. However, I understand the hon. Gentleman's point about having a proper share of lottery funding across the country. We have made progress on this, although a lot remains to be done.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of truancy and school exclusion. I do not know whether he has seen the report of the social exclusion unit, which sets out a way forward.

I conclude, Mr. Deputy Speaker, as is the tradition, by wishing you, the staff of the House and all my colleagues both a merry Christmas and, let us hope, a prosperous and peaceful new year.

British Science

12.29 pm

Dr. Ian Gibson (Norwich, North): European directive 90/220 will certainly not set the world alight, nor will it knock Delia Smith off the top of the bestsellers list at Christmas, but I would like to put it in context because it raises some important issues.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry said recently:

"Knowledge is the key to competitive advantage in the global economy."

He went on to say that the Government have a vital role in building and maintaining a powerful knowledge base in our universities, which is why we are putting an extra £1.4 billion, with the Wellcome Trust, into upgrading Britain's science, reversing years of neglect—as was admitted recently in an astonishing burst of honesty from the right hon. Member for Wokingham (Mr. Redwood), the shadow Science Minister.

Other Government initiatives include a £50 million university challenge fund to exploit university research and develop it in industry. The Department of Trade and Industry has emphasised the startling advances in science and technology, and especially in biotechnology. The Science and Technology Select Committee is currently holding an inquiry into the process of innovation—how scientific discoveries are moved into the workplace—here and in the United States of America. It is clear that moving ideas into industry and the marketplace will require a proactive Government and individual creativity.

The European directive fits into that pattern. It governs a new technology, stating that it regulates

"the deliberate release into the environment of genetically modified organisms".

These days, that generally means plants. The directive is designed for experimental and marketing purposes. It follows laboratory stages and tests and is used to assess growth, yields and survivability of plants. The tests start in pots and progress to a few square metres, and finally a large number of hectares.

The regulations require applicants to submit detailed information covering all aspects of the proposed release, the genes and organisms and the transformation methods used, as well as a comprehensive risk assessment, evaluating the risks posed to human health and the environment. Applicants must include full details of how the risk will be managed. There is a fast-track procedure to get information in 30 days, but the standard procedure takes 90 days before approval is given. The final stage after that is the commercialisation of the product.

Companies wanting to market seed in Europe must seek clearance under directive 90/220. Seed directives require national testing before any seed can be grown commercially. The next stage involves approval by every EU competent authority in all member states. Anomalies have certainly arisen in the process. The procedure, and especially the approval process, means that member states can object to anything approved in Britain, for example, while anything approved in Europe can be marketed in this country.

The public are disturbed by the use of genetically modified plants as foodstuffs. A debate is going on about the benefits versus the risks of the technology, not only to human health but to biodiversity and the environment. An assessment can be made only by monitoring, experiments and field trials.

I invite the Minister to comment on weekend newspaper reports stating that a key Government report on the effects of growing genetically modified crops has been suppressed because of a controversial warning of serious environmental risks to our hedgerows, birds and indigenous plants posed by growing genetically modified crops on a commercial scale. It is rumoured that the document also reveals a series of gaps in the UK regulatory framework.

In general, procedures for small experimental releases, which include control measures for reducing pollen transfer, for example, work well, because member states have a fair degree of autonomy. The main problems arise when approval is sought for marketing across the European Union. Within the UK, marketing proposals have been dealt with efficiently and within the deadlines agreed in the directive. Decisions at EU level take an excessive and unpredictable time.

Short licence periods—it is now suggested that they be up to seven years—have been proposed, with no further guarantee of renewal. That is extremely frustrating in an area of plant production in which continuous development is needed. The monitoring processes are too detailed, complex and cumbersome.

The directive applies only to the products of genetic modification and ignores similar modifications made by conventional breeding. If, for example, we consider the potential long-term environmental and agricultural impact of genetically modified plants with herbicide tolerance, we should take account of similar varieties produced by conventional breeding. It is illogical for the full weight of regulatory oversight to fall on GM varieties, while the potential input of similar, conventionally bred, varieties is largely ignored.

The risk assessment carried out before releasing a GM organism must be based on a careful scientific analysis. We in the UK have worked hard to maintain a strong scientific base in that process. An important part of the underlying research has been carried out by or in association with people in my constituency, at the John Innes centre in Norwich, but there is strong evidence that political considerations have influenced the decisions in the EU regulatory process. Public concerns must be listened to and taken into account, but in the long term political concerns should not be used to influence scientific assessment in the application of GM organisms. The scientific and political processes should be kept separate.

It is important for decisions made in one EU country to be acceptable in another. We need to continue the hard work to attempt to achieve harmonisation of the regulations in the risk assessment process among member states and between the EU and other continents, especially north America—although I doubt that the Americans will agree at this stage, because their regulations are very much more lax than ours.

Monitoring the impact of GM crops on the environment, and on food and feed, should be an integral part of the commercialisation process. Certain risk assessment issues are scale dependent and can realistically be assessed only as part of the scale-up procedure, with the hectare field trials that I mentioned. Public and scientific confidence will

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be improved by instigating a careful, scientifically rigorous monitoring programme. Many scientists in this country, including those in Norwich, will play a major part in that monitoring process and in using their scientific expertise to develop it.

The directive has features that could turn scientists and companies away from Europe and towards the United States of America or elsewhere, thus weakening the competitiveness of European agriculture and destroying the scientific base in our biotechnology industry, which is one of the best in the world and one of the great hopes for industry in this country, producing new vaccines, medicines and the plants about which I have spoken.

The directive needs amendment, adaptation and revision, so that permission to release GM organisms is based on sound scientific and objective information. Each release should be approved by a committee that is truly independent and not based on European political in-fighting. I suggest that the European Medical Agency is just such a body, in which scientific differences could be discussed, and indeed reconciled, to prevent such conflicts as have arisen and will arise again in the coming year or even months.

12.39 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Alan Meale): I join my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office in conveying seasonal greetings to you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, and to others in the House.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North (Dr. Gibson), who has always been deeply concerned with science. He has always been at the forefront in the House in promoting debate on science. I note that he mentioned the John Innes centre, which is famous among the many gardeners who follow developments in fertiliser and was connected with the late Percy Thrower, who did such a marvellous job for horticulture in the United Kingdom.

The principle of sound science is fundamental to the Government's approach to the regulation of genetically modified organisms. That is the case at the national, European and wider international levels. The Government recognise that the technology has enormous potential to improve the quality of life and the competitiveness of the economy, and that the regulatory system needs to support technical developments without imposing unjustified burdens on industry. However, the protection of human health is paramount and the impact on the environment and biodiversity, along with ethical issues, must be thoroughly assessed. The Government are determined that the regulatory system will not allow any product to move to commercialisation before practical evidence on safety is available.

My hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North asked about recent press reports. The draft report in question was written by a senior scientist in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and explores the wider implications for farmland wildlife and the environment of the commercial cultivation of genetically modified crops. The risks arising from genetic modification itself are fully covered by scientific legislation, and the report addressed other possible indirect effects. We have no evidence of any harmful effects, but the issues must be explored and have been under debate in the Department for some time. I assure my hon. Friend that no report has been suppressed. The risks of the introduction of genetically modified crops into commercial agriculture are being openly discussed and closely regulated.

In order to address concerns about the possible effects on farmland wildlife, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment announced on 21 October that ecological studies will be undertaken on farm-scale planting of genetically modified, herbicide-tolerant crops, starting in 1999. The Government's Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment—ACRE—will now take wider biodiversity issues into account when considering proposals to market genetically modified crops. Those issues will be discussed in detail through an ACRE expert working group and the conclusions will be made public and published.

The United Kingdom has an active and successful biotechnology industry. It spans a wide range of sectors including the pharmaceutical, diagnostic and agri-food sectors. There are more than 250 biotechnology small and medium-sized enterprises in the United Kingdom, with total biotechology-dependent sales by UK companies reaching £4 billion. That figure is expected to rise to £9 billion by 2000. United Kingdom biotechnology start-up companies alone currently employ more than 11,000 people. If the anticipated growth occurs, that figure will increase substantially. However, the continued success of the industry depends on public confidence in the technology and a strong, transparent regulatory regime is a vital factor.

At the national level, advice on the release of GMOs into the environment is given to the Secretary of State for the Environment frequently by ACRE, which is one of four statutory scientific and technical committees that give advice to the Government on GMOs. Members of ACRE are appointed on the basis of their technical and scientific expertise in subjects necessary for the assessment and understanding of the highly technical information provided in applications to release genetically modified organisms. Currently, they are a mix of specialists in sciences related to biotechnology, entomology and plant ecology, food safety and human health, and environmental affairs. ACRE is increasingly being asked to address wider issues, and my Department proposes to strengthen the committee's expertise in ecology and biodiversity, agronomy and farming practice.

In the European arena, the United Kingdom has welcomed the Commission's proposals to amend directive 90/220. Experience has shown the importance of the existing sound regulatory framework that secures the protection of the environment and human health while at the same time encouraging the development of biotechnology products and providing a route to their marketing in the community. However, the technology is developing quickly and we recognise that the existing directive needs to be updated.

The main problems that have been encountered with the directive have been the bureaucracy entailed in the approvals procedure in the European Commission and the difficulty of resolving differences of opinion between member states about the products. Concern has also been expressed, by ourselves and others, that the directive does not provide the framework necessary to address the

increasing concerns of the public and industry. In our view, the Commission's proposal went some way towards dealing with those problems, although it could do more.

The Government's aim in negotiating the amendment with our European partners has been to ensure that the right balance is struck between protecting the environment and human health and at the same time providing enough certainty for business to allow it to have the confidence to develop new products. The Government believe that our approach is right for the environment and right for business. The revised directive will include agreed time scales—which are vital to the industry—for the approvals procedures. Negotiations have centred on the balance between periods for consideration of dossiers by competent authorities and periods for mediation.

It is generally agreed that the existing 30-day period is not long enough for a competent authority fully to consider a new marketing dossier. A longer period of, perhaps, 45 days appears to be preferred, with a similar period for mediation. Fifteen days is also considered by many to be inadequate for assessing whether a notification complies with the criteria for simplified procedures. We are still some distance from reaching agreement on those points and further discussions on the details surrounding time scales and procedures will be necessary.

The Commission has proposed an enabling provision for simplified procedures for marketing notifications of certain GMO products, but did not specify the procedures or the criteria. Considerable misgivings have been expressed about such an open provision and they have led to calls for criteria, or guidelines for criteria, to be developed before the amending directive is adopted.

The United Kingdom has supported the introduction of differentiated procedures for marketing applications in principle, but of course the criteria will be critical. If there is any ambiguity, notifiers applying under the simplified procedure could find that the competent authority does not agree and rejects their notification. Even if the competent authority which receives the notification agrees that it fulfils the simplified procedure criteria, other competent authorities might disagree and object to notification. Should it not prove possible at this stage to develop clear guidelines or criteria, it may be appropriate to abandon the provision.

To ensure full protection for human health and the environment, the Government support the view that thorough risk assessments are essential and should address direct and indirect effects, and immediate and delayed effects. The United Kingdom has long emphasised the need to develop a harmonised approach to risk assessment for the release of GMOs, and that will be helped by the proposed introduction of the principles of risk assessment. That will foster the harmonisation that will improve the approvals procedures.

The Government believe it right to take a cautious approach during the early stages of relatively large-scale use of the technology. Hon. Members will be interested to know that the current directive does not require any monitoring after a marketing consent has been issued, although it would be possible to attach a specific monitoring condition to such a consent. Rigorous post-commercialisation monitoring forms a fundamental part of the revised procedures.

The Commission proposes to require notifiers to supply a detailed monitoring plan. The United Kingdom believes that no matter how detailed the scientific evidence indicating that a product will not have adverse effects, we still require field observations to confirm that. There should be a means by which unexpected adverse effects can be fed back to the consent holder and the competent authority.

Clear and unambiguous labelling of genetically modified products will be vital to ensure consumer acceptance. The Commission proposal requires that products be labelled either "contains GMOs" or "may contain GMOs". Most member states want to remove the latter option as it offers little useful information to the end user. However, requiring that products be labelled positively raises the question of how to deal with cases in which a GMO is present in trace amounts or in which there are impurities in a non-GMO product.

Further difficulties arise where similar GMO and non-GMO products are mixed together, as sometimes occurs with commodities. One possibility is the establishment of a mechanism to determine thresholds for specific classes of GMO products or individual GMOs, rather than fixing a single cut-off point for labelling. That would ensure that information was freely available to the consumer on GMO products, and that is another important step towards securing consumer confidence in the technology.

As far as action by the UK is concerned, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment recently announced that agreement had been reached with the plant breeding industry for a programme of managed development of herbicide-tolerant GM crops under which the first farm-scale plantings of herbicide-tolerant GM crops would be strictly limited and monitored for ecological effects alongside comparable plantings of conventional crops.

That process will be underpinned by the code of practice of the Supply Chain Initiative on Modified Agricultural Crops, a consortium of bodies representing plant breeders, agri-chemical companies and farmers. The code is voluntary for farmers who wish to grow GM crops developed by SCIMAC. Independent scientists would be able to see whether there were any harmful effects by studying crops on the field scale before widespread commercialisation. If ecological monitoring did reveal harm to the environment, the Government would take appropriate action, including a ban if necessary.

There have been a number of reports that we have imposed a three-year moratorium on insect-resistant crops, but that is not true. We have established with industry that no insect-resistant GM crops are in the final stages of development to be suitable for cultivation in the UK. For that reason, we do not expect insect-resistant GM crops to be grown commercially in the UK for at least three years. The concept of managed development provides a precautionary way forward to investigating, in a proper scientific framework, concerns that some GM crops might be harmful to the environment.

The principle of sound science runs through our policies, in domestic measures such as those that I have outlined and in our negotiations in Europe on directive 90/220. That principle also runs through our measures in the wider international field. The UK has supported a twin-track approach to the development of an international framework on biosafety, based on the promotion of the United Nations Environment Programme's comprehensive international technical

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guidelines on safety in biotechnology and the development of a biosafety protocol on the transboundary movement of living modified organisms under the convention on biological diversity. In current negotiations on the biosafety protocol, the UK is working with European Union colleagues and through other international groupings to produce an effective international instrument that will contribute to the safe use of biotechnology on the basis of scientific risk assessment and the precautionary principle.

That is an outline of the Government's position on these matters, which has been badly misrepresented in the media. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Norwich, North for the magnificent way in which he continues to develop the debate on science and technology. I wish him well in his endeavours.

12.56 pm

Sitting suspended.

Railtrack

1 pm

On resuming—

Dr. Evan Harris (Oxford, West and Abingdon): I am pleased to be able to bring to the House's attention the serious question of Railtrack's activities through its attempted use of permitted development rights in Oxford; and the wider questions of whether companies, particularly privatised utilities such as Railtrack should be able to exercise permitted development rights; and, also—if they are allowed to do so—what forms of consultation with local communities they should undertake and what bearing those consultations should have on outcomes. There is the further question of whether it is appropriate, fair and an act of natural justice for compensation to be payable by local authorities to private companies when those local authorities are successful in defending their local environment.

My constituency interest arises from the proposed development of a ballast storage facility, or what Railtrack calls a virtual quarry, at Hinksey sidings, which abuts my constituency, especially the community of South Hinksey. The site itself and another group of residents who are greatly affected by the proposals—those in New Hinksey and South Oxford—are in the constituency of the right hon. Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith), whom I see in his place. The right hon. Gentleman has taken a long and careful interest in the matter and has, like me, heard representations from local people for many months. I am sure that he has passed those on to the Government and added his own representations. Railtrack's activities concern many other hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis), who intends, after I have concluded my remarks, to raise the question of Railtrack's general attitude to development in his area.

I feel strongly about the subject, because Railtrack's activities in the case I shall describe have been appalling, not only in its proposals—though one might even argue that the company is entitled to make proposals—but in its response to subsequent events. The Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, the hon. Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Mr. Raynsford) who is to wind up the debate, will be aware that Railtrack has an important responsibility to improve the country's rail network—to upgrade existing rail lines to ensure that they can take faster trains, thereby enabling services to be improved, and to build more lines where necessary. I understand that that requires the laying down of large amounts of hard rock; and that to make that an effective method of building railway lines, Railtrack has to create storage facilities for the quarried rock around the country; and that 13 or 14 such sites are required.

The proposal that Railtrack made in respect of Hinksey sidings in Oxfordshire is for the 13th, or almost the last, of those stockpiling facilities. It has met with strong opposition because of the green-belt status of the site on which the company has chosen to build the storage facility. The fact that it would be a large, highly visible pile of rocks and stones, together with the added noise and dust pollution resulting from stones being transported to and from the site, would significantly reduce the amenity of people living in the area. There has been

strong local opposition, not only to the concept and the likelihood of pollution, but to the activities of Railtrack subsequent to events and the manner and mode of its consultation.

One would expect Railtrack to have made a thorough environmental impact assessment before the consultation period started. One would expect Railtrack to communicate carefully with local democratically elected representatives, including, but not exclusively, Members of Parliament. One would expect Railtrack to have given adequate consideration to other options before settling on the proposed site. However, Railtrack has been clearly seen by local people and independent observers to have failed in every single one of those duties, even though they are only the minimum that one could expect the company to perform.

Although we understand that Railtrack has to do its job, the company has to understand that it, as custodian to a large extent of the country's environment, has to balance that need to get on with its job with sensitivity to the environment. The Liberal Democrats have always believed that to protect the environment might in the short term cost a little more in purely financial terms, but that it is an investment worth making, not only for the sake of the improved quality of life and benefits that extend from a good environment, but because certain aspects of our environment and landscape are finite resources. Those sentiments have been echoed by Ministers who say they are concerned with the principle of protecting the environment.

It is clear that, by the time Railtrack produced its proposals, it had not considered either the environmental costs of choosing the site, or seriously considered choosing a different site which might have been more expensive, but which would have done the job at a lower environmental cost. One has to ask whether Railtrack failed to do that because it was concerned solely with its profits—profits that the newly appointed independent rail regulator has recently judged to be excessive. The company is now under the microscope as to whether it is concerned solely with potential profits and shareholder dividends, rather than with its wider social responsibilities. It is a monopoly organisation, so it should pay special attention to those wider responsibilities. It has inherited certain rights and responsibilities from a publicly owned corporation, British Rail, which, for all its faults, would not have acted in as shabby and arrogant a manner as Railtrack has exhibited in Oxford.

When the consultation process opened, we were led to believe that it would be a valid process—that whatever the views expressed by local people and their representatives, they would be heeded by Railtrack. To my disappointment, but not to any great surprise, I have recently learnt that a contract covering the site named as Hinksey sidings had already been signed, sealed and delivered to Midland Quarry Products by the time that that company released its prospectus on 1 June; yet the consultation with local people started much later that summer. I have asked the Minister about the need for Railtrack to carry out adequate consultation. His reply stated that guidance on non-statutory consultation makes it clear that

"both local planning authorities and the public should be informed of proposals for permitted development which are likely to affect them significantly, before the proposals are finalised."—[*Official Report*, 9 November 1998; Vol. 319, c. 22.]

There is no doubt that Railtrack, in its own mind, and in its contract with the sub-contractors, finalised the proposals even before consultation had started.

The specific problems that were drawn to Railtrack's attention during the so-called consultation related to the impact of noise on local people's enjoyment of their homes and gardens and the amenity of local playgroups and doctors' surgeries. All those groups made representations saying that the noise—effectively that of quarrying work—would significantly reduce their quality of life. Another representation was made in respect of health concerns relating to dust pollution. Railtrack sought to give reassurance in respect of both those matters, saying that there would not be significant noise disturbance because of the distances involved and that the stone would be thoroughly washed at source, so there would be little or no dust.

Mr. Norman Baker (Lewes): Does my hon. Friend agree that the unsatisfactory situation to which he rightly draws our attention is a consequence of the curious legal position in which Railtrack finds itself? As a private sector monopolistic company with public sector benefits inherited from British Rail, it should be investing far more in, for example, safety. It is overcharging some of the train operating companies for work done to stations. It is important that, when the strategic rail authority is established, powers should be taken away from Railtrack. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful if the Minister set out today what powers are to be stripped from Railtrack as part of the Government's review of the rail industry?

Dr. Harris: I endorse everything that my hon. Friend has said, and I pay tribute to his sterling work in this area. He has been a thorn in the side of those who seek to exploit their monopoly position and pollute the environment. Railtrack's approach in this matter contrasts with its rather grand environmental policy statement produced in the corporate responsibility review 1997-98—I shall allow the word "responsibility" to hang in the air for a few minutes and return later to the question whether Railtrack is acting responsibly. The statement says:

"We will ensure that new projects . . . are managed professionally in a way which incorporates assessment of environmental impact and takes appropriate action to keep any adverse impacts to a minimum.

We will aim to be sensitive in our management of natural and heritage features, taking into consideration the views of all those with an interest in our activities and working with them where appropriate."

Before my hon. Friend's intervention, I was referring to my constituents' many concerns about the project, including noise and dust pollution. Railtrack has demonstrated breathtaking irresponsibility by proceeding with the development of the ballast stockpiling facility while an article 4 direction is pending—especially in view of its statements that it was prepared to listen and enter into genuine consultation.

Railtrack may find that its actions will count against it. Local residents have now witnessed at first hand the spoiling of the local amenity. They have heard the noise created by that activity and seen—and, I fear, suffered from—the dust pollution. All of the potential fears raised about the project have been realised even before the

[Dr. Harris]

Secretary of State reaches a decision regarding the article 4 direction. The concerns of my constituents and the constituents of the right hon. Member for Oxford, East have been validated by Railtrack's recent actions in creating a stockpile, de facto.

I think that it is arrogant for Railtrack to proceed while the Secretary of State's decision regarding the article 4 direction is pending. I hope that it will get its come-uppance in the form of representations to the Minister from local people detailing the damage to the environment and to the local amenity as a result of Railtrack's actions.

In view of those local concerns, Oxfordshire county council took the correct—although brave—decision to issue an article 4 direction which, if upheld by the Secretary of State, would force Railtrack to submit to the due planning process. The Minister knows that his Department received that article 4 direction on 2 November, and it informed me on 9 November that a decision would be made as soon as possible. There are clearly broader issues involved and a significant—indeed, a landmark—decision will have to be taken. So I might understand why the Secretary of State has delayed his decision. However, I seek his reassurance that Railtrack's decision to press on with its proposal will not have a bearing on his ultimate ruling, which should be based on the environmental merits of the case and not any situation that Railtrack has manufactured at the time that the decision is taken.

I now come to the question of compensation as it relates to this case. If Oxfordshire county council is successful and the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions confirms the article 4 direction, Railtrack will be forced to undertake the normal planning process—which most would expect to be the normal procedure, given that this is a green-belt area. If Railtrack fails to secure planning permission and does not win any appeal, can it be right that Oxfordshire county council—which had succeeded in preventing a development that, in the view of the planning authorities, would damage the environment—should be forced to pay compensation? Moreover, such compensation would be paid out of the limited funds that are needed for the education of children and the provision of social services to the vulnerable, the young, the elderly and the mentally ill in Oxfordshire. Is it appropriate that the council should pay millions of pounds in compensation to a private company which has acted in such a manner, and which, in the view of the independent Rail Regulator, already makes excessive profits?

That cannot be allowed to happen. It is generally believed that the law must protect those who seek to defend our environment from unsuitable development. It is clear that, with a little more investment, Railtrack could use alternative sites in Oxfordshire, which would prevent the despoliation of Oxford's skyline and the loss of amenity to local people. I ask the Minister not only to urge the Secretary of State to uphold the article 4 direction, but to provide some encouragement in his winding-up speech today to my constituents and those of the right hon. Member for Oxford, East in their campaign to prevent the development.

I pay tribute to the campaigners from South Hinksey, South Oxford and particularly the New Hinksey area for the strong, fair, factually accurate and articulate way in which they have put their case. Thanks to their efforts, the development has generated a great deal of media attention that has pointed to the significant problems that the development would cause for those in my constituency and the local area and which similar plans would cause for people up and down the country.

1.16 pm

Mr. Phil Willis (Harrogate and Knaresborough): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) for allowing me to make a short speech during this Adjournment debate. I apologise to the Minister for my lack of courtesy in failing to let him know the contents of my contribution. I understand that he will respond to me in writing.

There is a saying that the sins of the fathers are often visited upon their sons. That is certainly true when examining the aftermath of the former Government's disastrous policy of selling off landholdings that were the key to improving the nation's transport infrastructure. Towns such as Harrogate are now paying the price: first, for the deregulation of the bus industry, which put valuable town-centre sites on the market for other than transport use; and then for the transfer of British Rail's former landholdings to Railtrack.

In Harrogate, development blight has virtually paralysed a strategic town-centre site for 15 years. The borough council, like the present Government, wants brown-field sites to be used for development. It wants to see retailing development and effective transport interchanges in our town centres. That would be possible without any cost to the Treasury or local taxpayers if Railtrack could be persuaded to use its strategic monopoly for public good as well as private profit.

The former bus station site in Harrogate cannot be developed without using adjacent land that is owned by Railtrack. The borough council rightly insists that any new development should have a transport interchange, including a bus station—a position that was confirmed twice by previous Secretaries of State on appeal. The borough council is willing to negotiate on commuted payment car parking to make the scheme a success, and the site's current owner, Scottish Widows, has agreed to operate on an "open book" basis with Railtrack in order to demonstrate that the development is marginal in profit terms.

Railtrack holds the key to the town's ambitions. It owns significant areas of land that have remained under-utilised for nearly 30 years. Yet every developer who appears—and there have been many—is treated with suspicion and often hostility, and usually gives up and moves away out of sheer frustration. Why? It is because Railtrack will not negotiate—and, frankly, as my hon. Friend said, it does not need to. That cannot be right.

If Railtrack had had to pay market value for its site, its accountants and shareholders would undoubtedly force it to act. As things stand, Railtrack can simply ignore the howls of public concern and sit on land for which it has no strategic use but will not release for the benefit of future investment in rail infrastructure or for the benefit of the people who wish to use the public transport system in Harrogate. Furthermore, the current planning

regulations will not allow the use of compulsory purchase powers because, if Railtrack claims operational use for any part of the land, it will become exempt. In short, Railtrack holds all the cards and the pack remains sealed.

It is ironic that, over the past 10 years, the council has secured investment of £750 million in the Harrogate station area. We seek two simple commitments from the Minister. First, when he next meets Railtrack will he please stress that areas like Harrogate—and Harrogate in particular—need Railtrack to co-operate in the planning system in order to provide the transport infrastructure that both the Government and the borough council desire? Furthermore, will he, if necessary, review the compulsory purchase regulations so that local councils can deal with the matter through their local planning process rather than having to wait for the vagaries of Railtrack and the market?

1.20 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Mr. Nick Raynsford): I congratulate the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon (Dr. Harris) on securing this debate on an issue which I know is of great concern not only to him and his constituents but to my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East (Mr. Smith) and his constituents. Both hon. Members have been assiduous in pursuing the matter with me and I have had several representations from them and their constituents.

The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Mr. Willis) raised matters relating to development which went far wide of the narrow focus of the debate, which is restricted to permitted development rights. As he will know from his contact with my office this morning, I shall write to him and deal with the points that he has made which are not germane to this debate.

As the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon has made clear, he and his constituents are concerned about Railtrack's exercise of permitted development rights to stockpile ballast on a site to the west of Oxford. Oxfordshire county council has made a direction under article 4 of the Town and Country Planning (General Permitted Development) Order 1995 to withdraw these rights. If approved, the effect of that would be to require Railtrack to submit a planning application for further development on the site. The direction has been submitted to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for approval.

I can assure the hon. Gentleman and my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford, East that the concerns raised by local residents—including those related to the impact on the green belt, noise, dust and visual amenity—are being taken into account alongside the views expressed by Railtrack and Oxfordshire county council. I am sure that hon. Members will appreciate that I cannot say more because to do so might prejudice my right hon. Friend's consideration of the issues involved in the case. A decision will be made as soon as possible, as I have already said in answer to the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon.

This is a complex issue and the Government office has today asked for further evidence from both Railtrack and the county council so that a properly informed decision can be made. I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the decision will be made solely on the merits of the case and will not be influenced by the fact that works have already been undertaken.

There are, however, a number of general points of principle arising from what the hon. Gentleman has said, to which I shall respond. Permitted development rights have been approved by the House and apply throughout England and Wales. They benefit a large number of bodies in the public and private sectors, including householders. It has been the policy of succesaive Governments that those rights should not be withdrawn locally without very good reason. Local planning authorities have been advised in circular 9/95 that, generally, permitted development rights should be withdrawn only in exceptional circumstances. The Government stand by that principle. It will rarely be justifiable to withdraw permitted development rights unless there is a real and specific threat to an interest of acknowledged importance.

The hon. Gentleman questioned why permitted development rights originally granted to a public body—British Rail—should continue to apply to private companies such as Railtrack. In general terms, the planning system is designed to regulate the development and use of land in the public interest. The ownership of the particular body carrying out the development is not relevant.

The statutory obligations of bodies such as Railtrack necessitate essential development from time to time, just as they did when they were vested in its public sector predecessor, British Rail. It would be in nobody's interest to require the submission of a planning application every time development was proposed, no matter how small or insignificant. Local planning authorities would be inundated with planning applications, the efficiency of the statutory undertaker's operations would be needlessly compromised and the resultant costs would fall to the customer.

I doubt that hon. Members would want Railtrack to have to apply for planning permission every time it needed to carry out essential safety, maintenance or enhancement works on the rail network. To do so could at the very least impose serious delays and at worst impose unacceptable risks for rail customers.

That does not mean that Railtrack or any other statutory undertaker enjoying permitted development rights can do whatever it likes. For example, in the case of the exercise of development by statutory undertakers under class A of part 17 of the general permitted development order, the development has to be by the railway undertaker on its operational land and required in connection with the movement of traffic by rail. It cannot, for example, exploit this power to build an office block or a supermarket anywhere it likes alongside the railway.

As the case that the hon. Gentleman has in mind demonstrates, even where permitted development rights exist, the local planning authority can, with certain exceptions, seek to withdraw those rights by means of an article 4 direction.

Where there is a sound case for improvements to be made to the operation of permitted development rights, the Government will of course give serious consideration to any necessary amendments to the regime. An independent study, commissioned by the Department, into the use made by statutory undertakers of their permitted development rights involved consultation with local planning authorities, statutory undertakers and a wide range of other bodies with an interest in the environment

[Mr. Nick Raynsford]

and heritage. It concluded that, by and large, the system of permitted development rights operates effectively, but it made recommendations for relatively minor amendments to the system, and those are being considered.

The hon. Gentleman asked why permitted development rights should be enjoyed in the green belt. As I said in my written answer to him on 9 November, one reason for withdrawing permitted development rights in a particular case might be the impact on the green belt. To remove those rights throughout the green belt for works involving development, however trivial, would be unjustified. Much of the railway network passes through the green belt and I doubt that hon. Members would want essential maintenance, safety and enhancement works to be delayed or prevented on those parts of the network because of a blanket disapplication of those rights and the consequent need to apply for planning permission.

The hon. Gentleman asked also why the local planning authority may be liable for compensation where permitted development rights are withdrawn. I shall elaborate on the reply that I gave him on 9 November. Since permitted development rights should not be withdrawn save in exceptional circumstances it follows that the body deprived of the rights that would normally be enjoyed should be entitled to compensation.

In the specific case of a statutory undertaker, compensation is payable only following the withdrawal of permitted development rights where, under section 266 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, the statutory undertaker subsequently applies for planning permission and the Secretary of State refuses permission or imposes conditions. Under section 280 of the Act, the general principle of assessment is that the claimant is entitled to compensation, including for all expenditure reasonably incurred in carrying out any acquisition or works made necessary by the proceeding giving rise to compensation and to loss of profits.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for Oxford, West and Abingdon for giving us the opportunity to consider those complex issues. I reassure him that they are receiving serious consideration in our Department and a decision will be made as soon as possible, when we have received the additional information that we have requested, and exclusively on the merits of the case.

Brown-field Sites (Teesside)

1.28 pm

Dr. Ashok Kumar (Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East): I am grateful for the privilege of having this debate, in which I want to bring to the attention of the House the need to address issues affecting the ability to achieve brown-field land regeneration. Some of the points and suggestions that I shall make were raised recently in an excellent seminar organised by the Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology at the Institution of Civil Engineers.

I represent a Teesside constituency in one of the largest industrial areas in the UK. I shall concentrate on issues that are central to the development needs of Teesside, but which are applicable to other industrial areas in the country. I shall begin by making historical remarks, and then consider the current issues on Teesside and suggest practical Government measures that could help our local economy.

The core industries of Teesside are of long standing. Iron making from the 1850s onwards made way for steel making and heavy engineering in the latter part of the 19th century. That industry was complemented by the growth of salt extraction, and heavy organic and non-organic chemicals at the beginning of this century. Those industries were both land hungry and polluting. They were symbols of what the social historian Lord Asa Briggs called the "carboniferous capitalism" of the Victorian age.

Teesside steel was made from iron mined in the nearby Eston hills and was smelted in furnaces fuelled by coal from the nearby Durham coalfields. At that time, pollution was seen as a symbol of prosperity. When Prince Albert came to Middlesbrough, he was told that he would see "many smoking chimneys" and that that was for the general good because smoking chimneys meant business and employment. Indeed, those smoking stacks dominated Teesside's industrial heartland until comparatively recently.

Technological and locational changes in industry, combined with the rising costs of energy and the decrease in customer demand as the recession of the 1980s bit, meant that many sites were abandoned by industry. The retreat of industry left a great legacy of polluted land, dereliction and visual decay.

Making full use of Government funding, the councils of the day and other regional bodies began the slow and complex job of making good the polluted land and bringing it back into productive use. This work was complemented by the creation of the Teesside development corporation in the late 1980s.

As the Minister knows only too well, I have often criticised the TDC and the autocratic and secretive way in which it conducted its affairs. However, its record in derelict land clearance and remediation has been good. At a cost of some £400 million, it cleared up to 500 hectares of derelict land in its lifetime and brought them back into productive use. Today, the visual outlook of much of Teesside has been changed for the better, as new leisure developments, new offices, new extensions for higher education and new houses have been built on former brown-field land.

The River Tees, once a waterway that ran between the high walls of factories and warehouses, has in many places once again come into the public domain.

Teesside is a greener, cleaner place, but there is still a lot to do. There are still more than 800 hectares of derelict land fronting the River Tees, and there are still vast areas of land that have been levelled by their industrial owners, but no beneficial after-use has been properly considered.

There are still large riverside areas which could again become valuable industrial assets for Teesside, but which are effectively left sterile by the seeming disinterest of the landowners. Such land is an underused asset in an area which, as well as being an ideal location for new capital-intensive industry, is a hub in bulk logistics.

The port of Teesside and Hartlepool is one of the top three ports in the United Kingdom in terms of tonnage handled, and is probably the nation's number one export-import facility for chemicals and bulk steel. There is a regional need to build on these strengths. I have an ambition to see the development of what could be a UK Euro-port.

I have been impressed by what I have seen and heard of port-related intermodal development centres. These are developed by port authorities on mainland Europe in, for example, Rotterdam, Antwerp and Wilhelmshaven. I would argue strongly for such a centre in Teesside—a centre where all forms of surface distribution and the infrastructure to service it, as well as safe storage, warehousing and Customs and Excise facilities, could be housed on a single secure large site. It would be a great project, and there is more than enough derelict land near the existing port terminals to allow it to go ahead.

Despite the contractions in and shocks to the industrial heart of Teesside in the 1980s, the area is still one of the heartlands of heavy manufacturing industry. The development agencies on Teesside, especially the highly successful Tees Valley development company, tell me that there is still a steady stream of inquiries from potential investors. These potential investors are anxious to build on the skills, talents and abilities of the people of Teesside. That is our strength.

An area once associated indelibly with one company—ICI—now has manufacturing plants owned and operated by some of the world's largest corporations, such as Du Pont, BASF, Union Carbide, Phillips Petroleum, Amoco and Enron. For many of them, their Teesside operations represent their largest stake in UK manufacturing. They are companies with international reach and vision. They are powered by global concerns and strategies, and they are shaping our modern world. There is, I would argue, a UK imperative to ensure that their presence in this country is cemented, and that they become key players in the building of the UK's national capability in chemicals. To underpin that, we need a huge portfolio of available sites on Teesside. The essential problem is that in order to do that quickly and effectively, we need more powers and more resources.

I greatly welcome the setting up of the new regional development agency for the north-east. This will go a long way to meeting the development needs of the northern region and Teesside, but the RDA is only part of the answer. It is not the complete solution to bringing vacant sites back to life. More powers need to be devolved from central Government in order to assemble land and to encourage—if necessary, to push—landowners into the development process.

We must look afresh at and review the practice of compulsory purchase arrangements and at possible fiscal measures. The compulsory purchase order process is long winded. A recent research paper by Drivers Jonas showed that a CPO can often take up to two years to implement, with another two years to settle compensation. A development agency or local authority with a good inward investment prospect anxious to move on to a site cannot afford to wait that long.

I have heard that inflated values are often agreed for land to ensure speedy possession, which involves buyers paying through the nose for land that is often contaminated and which requires new accesses and services. If that does not happen, a job-creating project could go elsewhere.

The CPO process is also complicated. Again, Drivers Jonas tells us that there are no fewer than seven principal Acts, as well as a host of circulars and reams of case law, which have a bearing on the CPO process. There is a cast-iron case for some form of consolidation so that people know where they stand.

I referred to the work of the Teesside development corporation. One of the powers of that body, as of all the other urban development corporations, was the power of acquisition for

"the overall regeneration of the area".

That phrase was enshrined in the Local Government, Planning and Land Act 1980, which gave special consideration and powers to the UDCs. They did not have to demonstrate any specific use for the land, and did not have to jump through all the hoops that local authorities and existing development agencies now have to negotiate. Why not reinstate that power for these bodies? I am sure that it could be done simply, either through a circular from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions or by adding a single clause in any general local government or planning Bill.

The other thing that the Government can do is to state forcefully that the scales are to be tilted in favour of active vacant brown-field land development. They should stress through a new planning policy guidance circular that there will be an active presumption in favour of the compulsory purchase of land that is substantially vacant or derelict. That needs to be backed by strong Government encouragement to large institutional landowners on Teesside, such as British Steel, the port authority and Railtrack, actively to review their land portfolio and market it actively.

I should like to make one final suggestion, which could be considered controversial, but which I hope my hon. Friend the Minister will study seriously. There has been much talk of a green-field levy to encourage developers to make greater use of brown-field land. That is one side of the coin, but we must look at the other side too. I would argue that there should be some fiscal stick to partner the carrot of a green-field levy. Why not consider a brown-field levy—say a percentage of the capital value of any site that has remained unused for a fixed time, and where there is no indication of any material progress towards a defined end use? I do not mind what time is fixed; that could be decided later.

Proceeds from such a levy could be ring-fenced, just as the landfill tax is used to fund environmental improvements. The levy could help towards remediation work on brown-field sites where active disposal and marketing are under way. It would be a spur to owners and provide financial assistance to central—and local—Government, who must fund the process. My suggestions could, of course, be applied nationally.

[Dr. Ashok Kumar]

Teesside's derelict land problem must be addressed. The suggestions would, if examined, refined and adopted, have a great impact on its ability to enter the new millennium as a strong, confident manufacturing and trading region. I look forward to an encouraging response from my hon. Friend the Minister.

1.41 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East (Dr. Kumar) on his helpful and perceptive contribution to this very important and continuing debate on brown-field land regeneration. He spoke not only in general, but in particular, and concentrated most of his arguments on Teesside, which he represents.

I am aware that English Partnerships, in consultation with local authorities and major landowners on Teesside, has decided that a strategic view of regeneration needs to be taken towards the under-used and derelict land along the Tees. That has resulted in several comprehensive studies in order to provide a programme of action to achieve regeneration, ranging from environmental improvements to providing employment opportunities for the region. My hon. Friend is right to point out that, despite the progress in the past decade in derelict land clearance and the return of sites to productive use, there is still much to do.

When my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister launched our policy document "Planning for the Communities of the Future", he made it clear that one of our most testing challenges as we approach the millennium is how to create a more sustainable environment and more sustainable communities. In so doing, we must ensure that the best use is made of the many thousands of previously developed—brown-field—sites.

An urban task force was established in April, under the chairmanship of Lord Rogers of Riverside, to identify strategies that will encourage the regeneration of our towns and cities through the redevelopment of previously used land. One of its responsibilities is to look at practical means of ensuring the delivery of development on brown-field sites. It will consider, for example, whether any improvements should be made to the system of public land acquisition. It will examine whether there is a strong enough presumption in favour of acquisition, and whether the process could be simplified. It will address other mechanisms for achieving the goal of assembled land, including lessons from abroad.

The urban task force will also be looking at the possibility of speeding up site preparation by, for example, improved measures for the remediation of contaminated land, and the potential use of fiscal measures and the removal of financial disincentives. Lord Rogers's urban task force will produce its report in the spring.

We are also assembling data for the first stage of the national land-use database, which will provide crucial data on the amount of previously developed land in England. That is a vital step in the process of maximising the redevelopment of sites. We are, of course, actively working on the new planning policy guidance note—PPG3—on housing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough, South and Cleveland, East discussed the mechanism of compulsory purchase and, like many others who wish to encourage urban regeneration and the provision of better housing, highlighted perceived deficiencies in the system. It is often said that the way in which the compulsory system operates is not the equal of 21st century conditions. Indeed, last year the interdepartmental working group on blight concluded, among other things, that compulsory purchase and blight are inseparable bedfellows.

I am told that local authorities that wish to clear life-expired housing stock are frustrated that their powers seem insufficient to the task; or that the compensation code seems to reward delinquent landlords; or that people in negative equity are put in an impossible position if their properties are compulsorily acquired. In other circumstances, such as those described by my hon. Friend, authorities report that they have inadequate powers to acquire sites for regeneration. Several authoritative reports have demonstrated that the system can be very slow.

In the face of such overwhelming evidence of a reported mismatch between the tasks that we expect local authorities to perform and the tools given to them to enable them so to do, it was plainly essential that we should take the system to pieces—so to speak—and subject it to detailed scrutiny. Therefore, in June my hon. Friend the Minister for the Regions, Regeneration and Planning announced the institution of a fundamental review of compulsory purchase and compensation. The review—the interim report of which we are considering—is indisputably the most thorough examination of this complex law for a generation.

The House will know that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has made clear his determination that policy making should be a far more inclusive process. For that reason, and in recognition of the magnitude of the task, we have secured an eminent advisory group to assist us in the review. With top lawyers, planners, surveyors, academics, representatives of local authorities, the farming community and other property interests represented on the group, we can be confident that no stone will be left unturned and no argument left unvoiced. If there is an answer to the problems with which we are apparently faced, I have no doubt that the group will find it.

I am sure that my hon. Friend will forgive me if I do not divert into a paragraph-by-paragraph consideration of the interim report. It is detailed and exhaustive, and warrants close consideration before publication. However, I am equally sure that he will be interested—I hope encouraged—by some of the group's earliest findings. They were sufficiently important, and advocated by the group with sufficient confidence, for us to take its advice and act without waiting for it to submit its interim report.

Probably the most interesting of the early conclusions was that the lack of local authorities' use of compulsory purchase powers, or their lack of success in deploying them, was less a question of sufficiency of powers and more one of authorities' lack of expertise in and understanding of such powers. That is hardly surprising because if one does not use a skill, one loses it.

As the group rightly says, it would be nonsense if we were to allow so basic an impediment to efficiency, effectiveness and fairness as a lack of expertise in operating the system to persist. It has therefore recommended that a comprehensive CPO manual, combining procedural guidance and best-practice advice, should be drafted, to which we have already committed substantial funds. In case anyone should dismiss the idea of a guidance manual as trivial, I should say that initial responses from authorities and professionals have been uniformly enthusiastic. "We could have done with this years ago" was the opinion of one local authority planning officer—from a highly CPO-proficient authority.

Despite the group's conclusion that the erosion of the skills base was a significant factor in the low use made by authorities of their CPO powers, it nevertheless considered very carefully the issues that my hon. Friend has set out so succinctly. In particular, the group examined the proposition that local authorities could not achieve their regeneration objectives because they did not have the powers to do so.

It is true that urban development corporation powers are different from local authority powers, just as it is true that UDCs and local authorities are distinct creatures in statute. However, different powers do not mean less effective or less appropriate powers. As constitutional lawyers will remind us, powers are closely related to statutory functions: UDCs had very precise statutory functions, and powers were given to each UDC only after Parliament had been assured that a specific, geographically circumscribed need had been demonstrated.

As regards local authorities, Parliament does not, cannot and should not interest itself in the detail of individual schemes: those are matters for discussion, resolution and accountability at local level. Given that the nature of the two types of body is different, their powers are different, too, although equally appropriate and equally adequate.

I shall give two examples. In Leicester, the successful delivery of its city challenge regeneration strategy necessitated the acquisition of several acres of land which was under-utilised or, in the context of the overall scheme of regeneration, inappropriately utilised. The city council deployed the powers available to it under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and acquired the land. With good title to the land and vacant possession, the council attracted sufficient interest from developers to undertake a remarkable transformation of the area, in terms of both economics and aesthetics. More recently, a compulsory purchase order, using the same power, was successfully used by the then Rochester city council for the regeneration of part of its riverside area.

I urge my hon. Friend and his colleagues on Teesside metropolitan borough council to examine, with their professional advisers, those cases of the successful use of existing compulsory purchase powers for regeneration-linked purposes, to see whether the perceived impediments to their use are, in fact, real. If my hon. Friend and his colleagues remain convinced of the mismatch between task and tool, I will ask the working group to visit Teesside to explore with him and his colleagues why that may be so and what may need to be done to rectify matters.

I welcome my hon. Friend's interest in the role of ports in local economic regeneration. That is a key theme of our integrated transport strategy, and will be developed in a ports policy paper on which we hope to consult shortly.

I applaud the expansion that has taken place at the port of Tees and Hartlepool, which was undertaken by the port authority and involved studying market potential, making commercial judgments and backing those judgments with development plans. I would expect any further expansion at the port to follow the same process.

It is for the Tees and Hartlepool port authority to consider what future direction it wishes to take. Some ports might expand by offering added-value facilities, potentially improving logistical efficiency. In other cases or trades, ports may do better to focus on providing a seamless link between supplier and customer. Those are matters for commercial decision by the port authority.

Finally, my hon. Friend came up with what he called a controversial—I prefer to call it interesting—suggestion of a brown-field levy, as an incentive for people holding previously developed sites to develop them. That would encourage people who are just sitting on land to develop it or release it for others to develop. He will, of course, understand that tax issues are a matter for our right hon. Friend the Chancellor.

We are currently considering some of the options for taxes that would give the right signals to developers. If my hon Friend has any further details of his proposal for a brown-field tax, I would be happy to look at it.

It being before Two o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Sitting suspended, pursuant to Standing Order No. 10 (Wednesday sittings), till half-past Two o'clock.

MESSAGE FROM THE QUEEN

Double Taxation

The Vice-Chamberlain of the Household reported Her Majesty's Answer to the Address, as follows:

I have received your Address praying that the Double Taxation Relief (Taxes on Income) (Ireland) Order 1998 be made in the form of the draft laid before your House.

I will comply with your request.

Oral Answers to Questions

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Departmental Annual Report

1. **Mr. Michael Jack** (Fylde): In what ways she proposes to change the format of her Department's annual report to reflect the effect of conflict on the problems of less-developed countries; and when she plans to publish it. [62742]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): Preventing and reducing conflict, and responding to emergency and humanitarian needs, are important aspects of our Department's work. There will be a substantial section dealing with those issues in this year's departmental report, which will be published in the spring.

Mr. Jack: I am delighted that the Minister has confirmed that he will do rather better than this year's report, where only five out of 201 paragraphs deal with the subject of conflict. The Secretary of State, in the House and outside, has rightly drawn the public's attention to the damage that conflict can do to the effectiveness of our overseas aid programme. Will the Minister consider heading up the title "An Audit of Conflict" and use it effectively as an audit to deal with the victims—who are in many cases the subject of human rights difficulties—so that we may learn more about those problems, within nations and outside?

Mr. Foulkes: I understand why the right hon. Gentleman was not fully satisfied with the format of the first report, because we followed the pattern used by the previous Government. We are able to improve and develop on that and, in doing so, we will certainly take account of his helpful suggestion.

Nepal

2. **Mr. Robin Corbett** (Birmingham, Erdington): What plans she has to offer assistance to Nepal. [62743]

6. **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): If she will make a statement on her recent visit to Nepal. [62747]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): We have recently published a new country strategy paper and I also visited Nepal in November. Our conclusion is that development efforts in Nepal over the past 30 years have largely failed the people of Nepal. There has been some progress, but poverty is still deep and widespread, and social indicators are some of the worst in the world. We can and must do better.

We believe that donors must co-ordinate their efforts around Government-led strategies to reduce poverty. The Government need to tackle deep-rooted problems of corruption and patronage, increase the efficiency of Government systems and improve the quality of basic services, particularly for poor people. We are prepared to increase our efforts and spending in Nepal, but only if there is stronger commitment to poverty reduction in Nepal.

Mr. Corbett: I thank my right hon. Friend for that reply, which showed that there is still widespread poverty and deprivation in Nepal. As a result of her visit, can she say by how much she plans to increase resources and by what means she hopes to change the attitude of the authorities?

Clare Short: Nepal is an incredibly beautiful but desperately poor country, and its people deserve better. For many years, and in very high proportions, it has been a major recipient of overseas development aid from across the world, and the impact should have been greater in reducing poverty and improving the conditions of the people.

We have analysed the failures of the past and set down a strategy for doing better. We will put a dedicated office into Nepal, but we will not increase the spend unless we can spend more effectively. We have said to the Government that we will increase our spend if we can work more effectively together, but we must reform the system, deal with corruption and get more effective government, otherwise there is no point in big flows of aid.

Helen Jones: I thank my right hon. Friend for what she has said so far, but what steps is her Department taking to promote better governance in Nepal, and to help bring about the fundamental changes that are necessary if poverty is to be eradicated in that country?

Clare Short: There was a great struggle in Nepal to obtain democracy, and the people united proudly and won it. There is a widespread sense of disappointment there that democracy has not lead to better governance, and there is rising anger about corruption. For example, there is great interference in the civil service and in political appointments, and therefore not the efficiency in Government systems that is required. I have had frank discussions with the Government of Nepal, all the parties and some of the leading organisations in civil society. There is a lot of disgruntlement and we need to put that into a positive agenda for change. There is also a Maoist insurgency because of the anger of the people, and clearly that will not lead Nepal anywhere. We alone cannot deliver improvements, but we will work hard if there is any will in Nepal to do so.

Mr. Gary Streeter (South-West Devon): I welcome what the Secretary of State has just said about Nepal, but now that she has had a few days for thoughtful reflection after her visit to the far east, does she accept that it was an error of judgment on her part to refuse to promote the interests of British companies on that visit?

Clare Short: No, I absolutely do not accept that. I am surprised that the hon. Gentleman, having had some time for reflection on the Conservative party's record of having misused aid to promote and assist British exports, of having been taken to the courts and found to have behaved illegally, should be standing there, in the job that he has, suggesting that aid should be linked to the promotion of individual contracts. That is always wrong. What we do

do all over the world is help to promote the conditions that will generate the economic growth that will reduce poverty. We are working increasingly strongly with major British businesses who want us to do that job and consider that the selling of individual contracts is a job for them or those Departments that exist to do that job.

Mr. Streeter: No one is talking about aid for trade. Everyone accepts that the Secretary of State's primary role on her visits abroad is to promote development and human rights. Does she not realise that all of us, whether Ministers, shadow Ministers or Back Benchers, all of whose salaries are paid for by the British taxpayer, have an intrinsic obligation, when we travel abroad to Nepal, China or anywhere else, to do our best to promote British interests? Will she give the House an assurance that, on her next visit abroad, she will bother to promote the interests of British companies and British jobs?

Clare Short: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman has an old-fashioned attitude to what Ministers should do to assist British business. If the hon. Gentleman bothered to consult British business—major parts of British business are, in increasing numbers, making contact with my Department—he would know that it explicitly asks us—*[Interruption.]* If the hon. Gentleman would stop heckling, I could answer his question. British business explicitly asks us to promote more stability, development, the enforcement of contracts and proper regulation so that business can trade and thrive. That is what they want of us. To go to a poor country and say, "Here we are assisting with improvements in education for the poorest children", or, in the case of China, "Here we are assisting with state-owned enterprises beginning to market, so you need skills in accountancy, modern banking, or whatever, and by the way, would you have X contract rather than Y", is a disreputable linkage. It does not promote Britain's interests for Ministers with responsibility for international development who are promoting development world wide to promote individual contracts. That is wrong.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I understand that my right hon. Friend was able to raise repeatedly the issue of good governance during the course of her successful visit, which was well reported in the local press in Nepal, as my right hon. Friend knows. Has my right hon. Friend anything to report on the request by the Speaker of the Nepalese Parliament for help through not only the British agencies, but the international agency network for a research facility to be set up to aid Nepalese Members of Parliament? That would be a major contribution to good governance, certainly in the Nepalese Parliament.

Clare Short: I am aware of my hon. Friend's visit to Nepal and of his enthusiasm for the proposal, about which he has written to me. I also met in Nepal people who had met him and who remember very well his visit there. The Government are extremely keen to support developments that improve governance and the Parliament's effectiveness. However, throwing money at things is not always the right way of achieving change. There has to be a real, committed will to make change. I had meetings with the World bank, the International Monetary Fund and other big donors, and we shall get behind such proposals if they are realistic. We shall not just throw money around.

Street Children Projects

3. **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): What assistance her Department has been able to give to street children projects affected by Hurricane Mitch. [62744]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): The hon. Gentleman's concern for the problem of street children is well known, as is his support for Casa Alianza, to which he referred during the Government's statement on the effects of Hurricane Mitch. Last month, a team of our experts visited Honduras and Nicaragua to assess the need for further relief. Our experts met representatives of Casa Alianza and discussed proposals for targeting street children as part of the relief effort. The next phase of our emergency assistance will, on our team's recommendation, focus on reconstructing basic infrastructure in transport, health and sanitation. I should be glad to discuss further with the hon. Gentleman proposals for work with street children.

Mr. Bruce: I thank the hon. Gentleman and the Secretary of State for their personal concern about the issue. However, I am sad to report that Casa Alianza was not very happy about its meeting with the team of experts, as it felt that the team had pre-decided the amounts to be spent. I should very much welcome a meeting with the Minister to consider specific projects that the Government could fund.

Mr. Foulkes: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that the meeting lasted 45 minutes. However, the team had also to consider other representations—from Governments, from non-governmental organisations and from the other international organisations working there. As 60 per cent. of roads and bridges, 70 per cent. of hospitals and 80 per cent. of water distribution networks in the area have been destroyed, I am sure that he will understand why the team thought that, currently, reconstructing that infrastructure should be the top priority.

Mrs. Maria Fyfe (Glasgow, Maryhill): I am sure that my hon. Friend will agree that the British public have been responding generously to the disasters emergency appeal. Is he able to estimate, either today or at an early date, how much our own Government have contributed to overcome the disaster, and how much has come from the British public in answer to the appeals?

Mr. Foulkes: I am not able to say how much has been given by the British public. However, the Government have given £4 million for emergency relief and reconstruction, and have pledged £10 million for the debt relief trust fund that we have proposed establishing. We have also suggested improvements in the debt relief timetable for highly indebted poor countries. When I met the five central American ambassadors to discuss those matters, they were very satisfied with the speed and generosity of the British Government's response.

Zimbabwe

4. **Mr. Andrew Hunter** (Basingstoke): If she will make a statement on UK bilateral and multilateral aid to Zimbabwe. [62745]

7. **Mr. Gerald Howarth** (Aldershot): If she will make a statement on the levels of European Union aid to Zimbabwe. [62748]

9. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton** (Macclesfield): If she will make a statement on the British aid programme in Zimbabwe. [62750]

10. **Mr. Desmond Swayne** (New Forest, West): If she will make a statement about aid to Zimbabwe. [62752]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): In November 1996, the European Community made £54 million available to the Government of Zimbabwe for poverty alleviation. No further commitments have been made by the European Commission since that date. Britain has a range of small programmes focused on benefits for the poor, costing about £10 million, which were almost all established under the previous Administration, and a £12 million aid and trade provision project with Land Rover, the commitment to which also was made by the previous Administration. Since our Government were formed, we have made it clear that land reform is desirable and justified in Zimbabwe, but that we shall support only land reform that is designed to help poor farmers, that is transparent and that complies with Zimbabwean law. Unfortunately, none of the proposals meets those requirements.

Mr. Hunter: I welcome that answer. However, will the right hon. Lady consider that we now know that President Mugabe presided over genocide in Matabeleland; over torture of political prisoners, some of whom were British; and over other civil rights abuses? Would it not be consistent with the Government's handling of the Pinochet affair and with their ethical foreign policy to halt all aid to Zimbabwe and to arrest Mugabe when he next visits the United Kingdom?

Clare Short: The temptation always—it happened after the nuclear tests in India and Pakistan—to make a country's poor pay the price of their Government's misbehaviour is understandable but wrong. If aid projects are benefiting poor people who are often also the victims of bad governance, it would be wrong that they should have to pay a double price by our cutting help because we are displeased with their Government. We should always review when we have problems with a Government.

We are all worried about the situation in Zimbabwe, but President Mugabe is the elected head of state, not a military dictator. If he or any other leader is in breach of the law and there is a legal process and an application to the British courts, it will be properly considered.

Mr. Howarth: We have just heard the most appalling example of hypocrisy from the Secretary of State.

Hon. Members: Withdraw.

Madam Speaker: Order. I will deal with this. I know that the hon. Gentleman will withdraw his remarks.

Mr. Howarth: I withdraw the suggestion that the Secretary of State was intentionally hypocritical. She has spelled out a disgraceful policy by the British Government. She knows how corrupt and incompetent Mugabe is and the crimes with which he has been charged. Does she accept that, in saying that she is prepared to grant aid to Zimbabwe to bring about land reform, she is playing into the hands of a man who will dispossess those farmers who contribute no less than 40 per cent. of the country's foreign exchange earnings? They are the engine of what economic activity exists in that country.

Clare Short: I do not know whether one is allowed to say that an hon. Gentleman is being rude and ignorant and has not listened to the answer but, if that is permitted, that is my response. I said to the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mr. Hunter) that when a Government engage in behaviour that worries us greatly and of which we do not approve, it is not right to hurt the poor people of that country, who are usually also the victims of bad governance. That is a serious proposition. If the hon. Member for Aldershot (Mr. Howarth) cannot understand it, I shall send him something in big letters with short sentences that he might be able to read.

My second point, of which the hon. Gentleman is clearly also unaware, is that the farmers organisations of Zimbabwe favour land redistribution. The large white farmers agree that the land is badly distributed and that there should be properly organised, transparent arrangements that comply with Zimbabwean law to increase the amount of land for small farmers. I do not know why the hon. Gentleman is getting so angry on their behalf; he is misinformed about their views.

Mr. Winterton: The right hon. Lady is right to say that land reform and the redistribution of some farms is essential for progress and success in Zimbabwe. I have just been there with colleagues from both sides of the House as a member of a Commonwealth Parliamentary Association delegation. I support the right hon. Lady's policy of not giving aid to Zimbabwe for land reform unless the proposals put forward by Mr. Mugabe and his Government are acceptable to all the donors. Does she accept that there is a need for aid to Zimbabwe to help the poor? I have visited Porta farm, which has benefited from aid from this country. Will she consider funding specific hygiene, sanitation and education projects that would be a positive help to the poor of Zimbabwe, which is a wonderful country that needs a bit of help?

Clare Short: I very much agree with the hon. Gentleman. Zimbabwe is a naturally rich country with very able people, high levels of education and good land. It should be progressing well and it is a tragedy that it is in such trouble. One adult in four in Zimbabwe is infected with HIV, but there is no Government programme to deal with it. The life expectancy of Zimbabweans has gone down by 20 years because of HIV. I agree that there are serious needs. The situation is worrying and the Zimbabwean Government are giving a poor lead. We are reviewing our overall relationship with Zimbabwe. If we cannot work with the Government, we can achieve less in the country, but we shall always do what we can to assist

the poor, who are often the victims of bad Governments, as the hon. Gentleman understands, although some of his hon. Friends appear not to.

Mr. Swayne: Can the right hon. Lady assure the House that future projects will be judged against the criteria that they cannot in any way be used to prolong the life of a corrupt and incompetent regime?

Clare Short: The hon. Gentleman also appears to have difficulty with his hearing. I thought that I had made it clear in my original answer that our existing commitments were put in place by the previous Administration. Nevertheless, they largely benefit the poor. I can give the hon. Gentleman an absolute assurance that future proposals which do not benefit the poor will not be approved. It is a delicate problem when very poor and oppressed people live under a Government who do not put their interests first. In those circumstances, we always try not to strengthen a bad Government, but to look after the interests of the poor. It is a complex matter, but we struggle to do that across the world.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): Having led the CPA delegation to Zimbabwe in September, may I refer my right hon. Friend to the problem of land reform, which is creating difficulties for the Government of Zimbabwe? If they take land from large landowners and do not have the cash to pay compensation, they are accused of seizing the land. Therefore, they are in a cleft stick. As my right hon. Friend said, the Government of Zimbabwe believe that land redistribution is essential but, if they take the land without providing compensation, they face difficulties.

Clare Short: I am sorry to disagree with my hon. Friend—he led the delegation well and we have discussed the matter previously—but I do not agree that the Government of Zimbabwe are in a cleft stick. Legislation passed since independence requires compensation to be provided in respect of land redistribution. Our position and that of the European Commission and many other donors is that there is a strong case for land redistribution and assistance will be available if it is transparent, properly organised and benefits the poor by providing proper water systems and schools for their children. A serious programme of land reform that would benefit poor farmers in Zimbabwe would get support from the rest of the world community and we are waiting to provide support to a proper programme that fulfils those conditions.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): Can my right hon. Friend give us an idea of the projects that will be supported by the £22 million provision that has been made for Zimbabwe? She mentioned the problems of HIV. I know that there are very active Marie Stopes family planning clinics tackling HIV and other problems in that country, which desperately need assistance.

Clare Short: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. One in four adults in Zimbabwe has the virus and Zimbabwean people have lost 20 years of life expectancy. It is an enormous crisis and there has been no attempt by the Government of Zimbabwe to follow the lead of Uganda, where there has been a marked decline of incidence of HIV. In Tanzania, we headed research showing that the early treatment of sexually transmitted diseases massively slows the spread of HIV. The commitments that I read out include some £10 million on sexual health. We want to do more, but we need a lead from the Government of Zimbabwe and from major figures there to deal with this terrible crisis.

Mr. Bowen Wells (Hertford and Stortford): Does the Secretary of State agree that some very good black Zimbabwean farmers are perfectly capable of cultivating the land to the highest possible standards, and that, therefore, redistribution to them would not reduce the agricultural productivity that is vital to the economic future of that country? However, is it not also perfectly possible to redistribute land to good black farmers without confiscating it from its present owners?

Clare Short: I agree completely with the hon. Gentleman. That is also the view of the farmers' associations of Zimbabwe. Most of those who own large farms agree that there is an overwhelming case for redistribution and have made detailed technical proposals about how it should be done. Of course, redistribution has to comply with Zimbabwean law, which requires that the land must be acquired legally and compensation must be paid. That is current legislation there. Everyone agrees that, if it were done properly, it could be beneficial to Zimbabwe.

Mrs. Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham): I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement that she is reviewing the UK's relationship with Zimbabwe, and not before time. May I suggest that it is irrelevant whether the commitments were made under the last Government, as they are being carried out by the present Government? How can she justify the UK paying some $20 million a year in aid to Zimbabwe when the President is spending £250,000 a day on a war in the Congo? He must think that Christmas has come early.

Will the Secretary of State now seriously consider transferring aid, perhaps to neighbouring Mozambique, which is both poorer and more democratic than Zimbabwe? The Mozambican Government would welcome support for cleaning up the debris of war, and such support would send a firm signal to developing countries that, when conditions for aid are broken, donors—particularly the United Kingdom—are ready to transfer funds to countries that abide by the rule of law.

Clare Short: Well, another Conservative Member with a hearing problem—perhaps the hon. Lady wrote her question before she heard any of the previous exchanges. I have made it clear—it is the view of anyone with any principles who considers aid and development—that poor people should not be punished for living under Governments who do not govern them well. I hope that she understands that clear principle.

We agree that the war in the Congo and Zimbabwe's role in it are deeply worrying. We are doing all in our power to secure a ceasefire and a settlement because of the consequences of the war for Zimbabwe and a number of other countries in central Africa. I also agree that things in Mozambique are going well. The country has had all the difficulties that history could throw at it, but it has recovered from civil war and has a good Government. We have considerably increased our programme there.

I wish Conservative Members would bother to find out the facts. I have not announced a review today. Since we took power, the Government have made absolutely clear to the Government of Zimbabwe our position on land. The hon. Lady and the shadow Foreign Secretary pontificate about aid on the radio, but cannot even be bothered to find out what the situation is. The British Government are taking a principled position.

Former Republic of Yugoslavia

5. **Dr. Norman A. Godman** (Greenock and Inverclyde): When she last met her colleagues from other member states of the European Union, to discuss the provision of funding for human and civil rights programmes in the former Republic of Yugoslavia. [62746]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development (Mr. George Foulkes): The Secretary of State regularly meets her colleagues to discuss this and other matters. In the former Republic of Yugoslavia we are, both directly and through the European Union, supporting work in human rights, helping to develop independent media, promoting peace and supporting the right of refugees to return home.

Dr. Godman: I am grateful for that answer. My hon. Friend will surely agree that a concern for human and civil rights should inform and influence all decisions on aid. Does he agree that, if the benighted region of Kosovo is ever to be given autonomy, the civil and human rights of the minority community will have to be honoured?

Mr. Foulkes: I understand what my hon. Friend says. In Kosovo, we are funding the UNHCR so that it can open an office in Pristina and we are also helping the Red Cross to deal with the victims of the conflict. I hope that he agrees that that is a good contribution from our Department.

World Bank

8. **Mr. Dennis Canavan** (Falkirk, West): What recent discussions she has had with the World bank about the bank's role in international development; and if she will make a statement. [62749]

The Secretary of State for International Development (Clare Short): I frequently meet the president of the World bank and his officials. We have been working since May 1997 to increase the bank's focus on human development and poverty eradication. In particular, we are trying to persuade the bank to make the international poverty eradication targets the basis for its agreements with the Governments of developing countries. The Chancellor of the Exchequer and I submitted a joint memorandum to the recent annual meeting of the bank and the fund, stressing the need for the institutions to co-operate more and to take more account of human need in emergency situations.

Mr. Canavan: What response has my right hon. Friend received to the letter that she and the Chancellor of the Exchequer submitted to the World bank, the International Monetary Fund and the Inter-American development bank? Were any specific measures suggested to reduce the debt burdens of some of the countries that were worst hit by Hurricane Mitch? What is the World bank trust fund doing to help the hurricane's victims, particularly in Honduras and Nicaragua?

Clare Short: I am pleased to be able to tell my hon. Friend that, when the crisis hit, the World bank immediately recycled the money available to the region so that no money had to be spent paying debt while other long-term arrangements were put in place. The trust fund that we proposed, and to which we made available £10 million, is now at £100 million. A team of experts from the bank is meeting with experts from the Inter-American development bank to provide the resources for reconstruction and the rescheduling of debt. In addition, the Paris Club—which deals with export credit debt—has agreed a moratorium on payments for the next three years. The process is not complete, but there has been fast action to assist reconstruction and to make sure that those countries do not have to pay out money in debt repayment when they need to reconstruct.

Dr. Jenny Tonge (Richmond Park): I am sure that the Secretary of State is aware that, according to the latest UN AIDS report, AIDS has now overtaken malaria as one of the biggest killers in the world. In many parts of the world, 25 per cent. of the work force are infected, and that is seriously affecting the economic development of those areas. What talks has the Secretary of State had with the World bank to support pharmaceutical companies which may be able to develop and carry forward an AIDS vaccine, which is really the only hope that the world has in terms of the disease?

Clare Short: The hon. Lady is right. Some 35 million people in the world are infected with the AIDS virus. Ten per cent. of all new infections are babies infected by their mothers, and most women infected have only ever had one sexual partner—their husband. Some 40 per cent. of infections are of young women. The epidemic is bad in Africa, but it is spreading across Asia, where we are at the beginning of an even worse epidemic.

An AIDS vaccine is possible and, hopefully, could be available within six years. However, it will not be brought to market for the strains that are prevalent in Africa and Asia without some intervention because the countries are so poor that they would be unable to pay for the vaccine. As the hon. Lady knows, we are talking to the World bank about arranging measures so that the science is taken forward and a product is brought to market.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [62722] **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 16 December.

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): This morning, I attended a meeting of the parliamentary Labour party

and had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall be having further such meetings later today.

Mr. Chapman: Has my right hon. Friend seen the press reports today of the National Audit Office's view of the privatisation of Railtrack? The NAO found that the previous Tory Government, in their unseemly haste to dispose of that national asset, effectively lost £1.5 billion of public money—public money that could have paid for health, education and the care of the vulnerable. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, in a perfect world, we might expect those who lost the money to repay it, but that, as the world is not in all things perfect, the least we can expect is an abject apology?

The Prime Minister: The £1.5 billion that was wasted as a result of the Conservatives' incompetence is a reminder of what they did while they were in government. Of course, they now wish to privatise the Post Office. I would say to the country that I do not believe that they should be put in charge of our public services again.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): In the light of the fact that Saddam Hussein is still failing to comply with UN resolutions on weapons of mass destruction, and bearing in mind the Prime Minister's assurance last month that nothing less than complete compliance was acceptable, may I assure the Prime Minister of the full support of the Opposition for the use of military action in the days ahead, provided that action has clear and achievable objectives?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his expression of support. The report by the chief inspector of UNSCOM lists in clear terms the obstacles placed in the way of the weapons inspectors—the delays, the deceit, the refusal to provide documents, the restriction on inspections. No one who reads that report can seriously doubt its conclusion that UNSCOM is unable to carry out its job properly. Indeed, the report states that there are greater restrictions now than previously.

I remind the House of the very, very clear assurance that was given on 14 November by the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister, who said:

"Iraq has decided clearly and unconditionally to co-operate fully with UNSCOM . . . and will allow the return of the inspectors to resume all their activities on an immediate, unconditional and unrestricted basis."

That promise is clearly now broken.

Mr. Hague: I am sure that I speak for the whole House when I say that our thoughts go out to the men and women of our armed forces who, thousands of miles away from their families this Christmas, may face the toughest of jobs in the weeks ahead. Does the Prime Minister agree that Saddam Hussein has now tested western resolve on too many occasions; that his determination to build weapons of mass destruction represents a continuing threat to the peace of the whole middle east as well as to the interests of the United Kingdom; and that, as Conservative Members have said before, it must now be a prime objective of western policy to remove Saddam Hussein from power?

The Prime Minister: It is the case, as I was saying, that the Butler report makes very clear the obstacles placed in the way of inspection.

I want to emphasise one other point to the House. I hope that we can make copies of that report available in the Library so that hon. Members can read it and digest the facts that it contains. The report details not merely the obstruction but the fact that it relates directly to documents, sites and personnel that would give a clue as to the whereabouts of the weapons of mass destruction and the capability to make them. It is not obstruction simply for the sake of it, but a plan of deceit to prevent those weapons of mass destruction from being located and destroyed. As we have said before, we believe that Saddam Hussein, if allowed to develop those weapons, poses a threat not only to his neighbourhood but to the whole world.

Ms Beverley Hughes (Stretford and Urmston): I think that it is clear that the people of Northern Ireland are less concerned with any single detail of the arrangements still under negotiation than with the fact that the agreement should hold fast. Will my right hon. Friend press that point as strongly as he can, so that the people of Northern Ireland can retain the agreement, as the best basis for peace, for this Christmas and all future Christmases?

The Prime Minister: We hope very much that agreement on the outstanding issues can be reached. I know that intensive negotiations are going on in Northern Ireland to try to bridge any remaining difficulties. On the issues concerning the north-south bodies, the Departments and the way in which the new Assembly will work, the differences between the parties are now very limited. I hope very much that the parties will bear in mind—I am sure that they will—my hon. Friend's plea, which I think would be echoed by everyone in the House and in Northern Ireland, that we should give this process, which is the only process that offers the chance of a stable future for Northern Ireland, every chance of working successfully.

Mr. A. J. Beith (Berwick-upon-Tweed): Can the Prime Minister confirm the existence of a Treasury report that says that Britain could join a single currency within eight months of a Cabinet decision to call a referendum?

The Prime Minister: A whole series of reports are produced. That report is no more or less than any other. The decision on whether we join, and the process of joining, is a subject that we have set out on many occasions. As the right hon. Gentleman probably knows, my right hon. Friend the Chancellor said recently that we would publish a draft national changeover plan in the first part of next year. That is the thing to wait for.

Mr. Beith: Has the Prime Minister reflected on the fact that, next time he answers Prime Minister's Questions in the House, the single currency will already be in operation and we will not be part of it? Whatever his real views—I am sure that he has some real views on the subject—he chooses to appear undecided, leaving business to make its preparations on the basis of guesswork and trying to read his mind. Would not a clear expression of confidence in Britain's future in the single currency and the single market be a much better Christmas present for the manufacturers, exporters and farmers on whom so many people's jobs depend?

The Prime Minister: It is important that we keep to the principles that we have outlined, because the decision

should be taken in the national economic interest. When those tests have been satisfied, we will be in a position to make the decision. That is the right way to set out the policy, it is the position we have adhered to throughout, and what manufacturing needs most is long-term stability. A decision on the euro cannot be taken on the basis of short-term problems, in manufacturing or elsewhere.

Mr. Andrew Reed (Loughborough): Despite the local difficulties in the football world in the past few days, does my right hon. Friend agree that Britain's bid for the 2006 world cup is still strong? Will he congratulate my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport on the excellent work that he is doing to promote that bid around the world? Will he put in his diary for 2006 a date to present the trophy to a mid-20s Michael Owen as captain of a winning England side?

The Prime Minister: I am delighted to give my support and congratulations to my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport on all the excellent work that he does. As for our bid for 2006, we believe that it is a very strong one. If the conditions can be satisfied, there may be a bid from Africa, but if there is to be a bid from this part of the world, the British bid is by far the strongest. We will carry on fighting the case for it.

Q2. [62723] **Mr. John Bercow:** (Buckingham): For saying that if we ditch the pound and join the euro, that is the end of Britain as an independent country, would the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) be described by the Prime Minister as a lunatic or as a headbanger?

The Prime Minister: No. I think I would reserve the term "headbanger" for others not located too far from the hon. Gentleman. *[Interruption.]* I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving me such immediate and visible proof. I remind him that the policy of his party is not to rule out the euro for ever—I think—or has it changed today? The policy that we have set out, basing the decision on the national economic interest, is surely the sensible way and that is the position that we will adhere to.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): On Iraq, is my right hon. Friend aware that, although there is overwhelming support in the United Nations for policies to bring about conformity with UN resolutions, if Britain and America bomb Iraq it will be contrary to the charter of the United Nations which requires the unanimity of the five permanent members; it will be illegal in international law; it will cause the death of many innocent people, and 200,000 Iraqis were killed in the Gulf war, leaving Saddam stronger; and it will inflame the middle east? Why does my right hon. Friend do everything that he is told to do by President Clinton, instead of taking an independent view in support of the charter, which has always been central to the policy of the party that he leads?

The Prime Minister: Such action would not be unlawful at all, for this reason. I take it as agreed between my right hon. Friend and me that the regime of Saddam Hussein must be prevented from building those weapons of mass destruction.

If we are agreed on that, the question is how. It can be done by Saddam Hussein complying with the agreements that he has entered into, or we have to look for other ways to enforce his agreement. The Gulf war ceasefire depended on the fulfilment of obligations that Iraq accepted at the time, including those relating to weapons of mass destruction.

Successive Security Council resolutions have confirmed the requirement for Iraq to fulfil those obligations. When in February we made our first attempt, through the memorandum of understanding between Iraq and Kofi Annan, the Security Council said that any breach by Iraq of its obligations under the memorandum of understanding would result in the "severest consequences". The Council has condemned Iraq's decisions to end co-operation again and again. On 14 November, we gave Iraq a further chance to come back into compliance. Given Iraq's manifest failure to co-operate in the past month, I am satisfied that, if we should choose to use force, we have the necessary legal authority to do so.

Ministerial Visits

Q3. [62725] **Mr. Anthony Steen** (Totnes): If he will visit Brixham in order to take a sea voyage on a beam trawler.

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so.

Mr. Steen: Is the Prime Minister saying that he would prefer not to witness the disastrous effect and the failure of his conservation policy? Once caught, 45 per cent. of the catch is taken on board, sorted and thrown back into the sea. Millions of prime fish are thrown back every day, dead. Does the Prime Minister feel that that policy is sensible, or is it abhorrent, environmentally damaging and a policy from which he would like to dissociate himself?

The Prime Minister: Unequivocally, I think that the present policy needs changing. Of course it does. However, I must remind the hon. Gentleman that it cannot seriously be thought that what he said has begun only now. It has been building up over a long period as a result of commitments entered into by the previous Government rather than the current one. Having said that, I agree that the current level of discarding is far too high and a terrible waste. We are working to reduce it with a range of measures, including reducing levels of fishing and making changes to technical rules on fishing gear. We shall argue against excessively large cuts in quota, although some cuts are necessary to conserve stocks for the future. We are committed to improving the common fisheries policy, but I do not believe that the alternative of leaving the policy altogether is seriously sustainable. We must be honest: changes are necessary, but we shall have to achieve them within the CFP.

Engagements

Q4. [62726] **Mr. Ian Bruce** (South Dorset): Has the Prime Minister had a briefing this morning on newly published labour market statistics showing detailed figures for unemployment? Does he know that for 18 to 24-year-olds—about whom he is so concerned—the number in employment has gone down during the

relevant quarter? Does he know that the number of long-term unemployed aged between 18 and 24 has gone up by 25 per cent. after six months of the new deal? What will he do about the new deal, which is turning out to be a busted flush?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Gentleman's facts are wrong. For a start, there has been a cut in unemployment levels among people within the new deal category who are aged 18 to 24 of more than 30 per cent.—the largest cut in unemployment for young people that there has ever been. Furthermore, even today's figures show employment over the past three months up by 80,000. The number of vacancies unfilled has risen again. There are 260,000 more jobs than there were a year earlier. As a result of what the Government have done, to the opposition of the hon. Gentleman's party, long-term interest rates are at their lowest level for more than 30 years. That is how to get through economic difficulties, not returning to having 15 per cent. interest rates, a million manufacturing jobs lost and Tory boom and bust.

Dan Norris (Wansdyke): Farmers in my constituency have been greatly encouraged by the lifting of the beef ban, particularly when they compare that with the lamentable performance of the previous Government. Does the Prime Minister agree that co-operation, not confrontation, is the way forward in Europe?

The Prime Minister: As a result of co-operating sensibly in Europe, we had the beef ban lifted. When we came into office, virtually nothing had been done to secure the lifting of the ban. As a result of what we did, and within 18 months of our following a different policy, we secured the lifting of the beef ban. I believe that that is the best way to get results for Britain in Europe. We will stand up for British interests whenever it is necessary and, if necessary, alone. However, we do not seek confrontation as the sole method by which to provide British diplomacy with a way forward.

Q5. [62727] **Mr. Andrew Lansley** (South Cambridgeshire): Has the Prime Minister read today the Treasury "Survey of Independent Forecasts", which forecasts growth for the UK economy in 1999 at just 0.8 per cent? That forecast is below the Chancellor's forecast range of 1 to 1.5 per cent., which was published just six weeks ago. Does the Prime Minister realise that while he complacently talks about stability, the reality is that his policy is bringing the British economy grinding to a halt?

The Prime Minister: As a result of the policies that we are pursuing, we have the best chance of getting ourselves through any economic downturn. Monetary stability is in place because of the independence of the Bank of England, which has given us the lowest long-term interest rates for more than 30 years. Because of the changes that we made in public spending on coming to office, we were able to reduce the Conservative deficit, and are able to put £40 billion extra into our schools and hospitals from next April. Through the working families tax credit and the new deal, we are helping families to make work pay. That is a better way of getting through any economic difficulty than boom and bust, underfunding of our public services, and creating a situation where we end up with large numbers of people unemployed for long periods, as happened under the previous Conservative Government.

Q6. [62728] **Mr. Bill O'Brien** (Normanton): Further to my right hon. Friend's welcome statement to the House on Monday, does he agree that there is a need for an impact study on the effects of the abolition of duty free on jobs throughout the United Kingdom, and its economic effect on airports, seaports and jobs in such units? The need for the impact study is heightened by the fact that information on the alternative to duty free has never been published. Will my right hon. Friend explain the difference between duty-free goods and tax-paid goods? I think that hon. Members are sometimes confused about that.

The Prime Minister: We support the notion of having a proper study of the effects of the abolition of duty free. The door to that has now been pushed open as a result of what we agreed at the Vienna summit. Our difficulty is still that, seven years ago, the previous Conservative Government agreed to abolish duty free and unanimity is required to change that. We shall try to do our best to get it changed; if we are able to do so, it will be another example of a better method of diplomacy than that of the previous Conservative Government.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): Last Thursday, the Treasury made an announcement that means that people who have done the right thing and saved for their retirement, but who are too poor to pay income tax, will now have to pay a new tax on their hard-earned savings. Will the Prime Minister personally look again at that misguided decision?

The Prime Minister: I explained last week that we would make an announcement on the policy on that matter, and we did so. We believe that it is in the best long-term interests of all pensioners. If we combine it with the measures that we announced yesterday, for the first time many people on modest incomes are going to get far better access to decent-quality pensions than they have ever had before.

Mr. Hague: This decision will cost the 300,000 poorer pensioners, who will lose their tax credit on dividends, an average of £75 a year. How on earth is that meant to be in their best long-term interests? Is it not yet another tax increase from a Government who said that there would be no tax increases at all? Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that Age Concern has said that it believes the decision to be totally unjust? Does he at least accept that the measure hits poorer non-taxpayers?

The Prime Minister: No, because the best thing for those pensioners and other pensioners is that we have a healthy method of ensuring that companies earn the profits that allow pensioners to get the best deal. Those people will get the best deal—*[Interruption.]* No matter how much Conservative Members shout, as a result of what we announced yesterday lots of people on modest incomes, for the first time and after all the pension mis-selling gambles of the Conservative years, are going to get the chance to save properly. It is the best deal for them and for all pensioners.

Mr. Hague: It is very clear from the Prime Minister's answers that he has no rational justification whatsoever

for the policy. I am sorry that he cannot admit that it hits the poorest non-taxpayers, because the Paymaster General has actually said that it does so. Although I note that he is not here now, the Paymaster General said in the House on 30 June:

"I am aware . . . of the growing anxiety among poorer non-taxpayers who have been hit by the measure".—[*Official Report*, 30 June 1998; Vol. 315, c. 175.]

Now, the Prime Minister is defending the measure, but will not agree with the Paymaster General. Surely he is not distancing himself from the Paymaster General for any particular reason?

Why have the Government taken this decision? Is the Prime Minister prepared to think again? Is he prepared to accept representations from Members of Parliament and from Age Concern and similar organisations, and to tell the Treasury to rescind the announcement that it made last week?

The Prime Minister: No. We looked at this over six months and we believe it is the right thing for future pension provision. I remind the right hon. Gentleman that, as a result of the changes we made yesterday—which I note he does not dispute at all—for the first time all those who have had a full working life will get proper pension provision. Those people will no longer be dependent on means-tested benefits. As a result of stakeholder pensions, people with private pension schemes will get better-value, better-costed and better-regulated schemes. Those people on incomes of less than £9,000 will get special help and those on incomes of between £9,000 and £18,500 will get even better help. Taken as a whole, the package gives the best deal to pensioners that this country has seen after years of pensions mis-selling and pension fraud under the Conservatives.

Mr. Hague: The Prime Minister has yet to say a single word in justification of this policy. Yet again, he and the Government are trying to face both ways at once. One day, they want to encourage everyone to save for their retirement, and the next day, they are defending taxing more heavily those people who have saved. The Government's indecision in this area has now produced a real and genuine injustice for several hundred thousand people. It is not too late to think again. Can the right hon. Gentleman produce a single reason why he should not think again?

The Prime Minister: Yes—and they are the reasons that I have just given the right hon. Gentleman. *[Interruption.]* I appreciate that Opposition Members do not wish to listen to them. Our pension proposals are better for those on modest as well as higher incomes. As a result of the proposals announced by the Secretary of State for Social Security yesterday, people on modest incomes will get more help than ever before with their pensions.

The right hon. Gentleman is quite right: there is a choice between Labour and Conservative on pensions, since I assume that the Conservatives' pension policy is still the one announced by their deputy leader before the election. *[Interruption.]* Opposition Members do not want to hear it. That would mean an end to tax relief on private pensions and the abolition, over time, of the basic state pension. It would have a massive upfront cost for current taxpayers. Our proposals will take more people off means-tested benefits, improve pensions for people on modest incomes and end the scandals of mis-selling allowed under the previous Conservative Government.

Q7. [62729] **Helen Jones** (Warrington, North): Does my right hon. Friend accept that the contribution that carers make to the economy has been consistently underestimated because we do not count the value of their unpaid work? Does he agree that yesterday's announcement of a second-tier pension for carers not only marks this Government's determination to protect the most vulnerable, but should signal our recognition of the extremely valuable work that carers do, at great saving to the Exchequer and often at great personal cost? Will my right hon. Friend assure the House that the future needs of carers will be at the forefront of Government policy not just in pensions but in other areas of social policy?

The Prime Minister: Yes. Carers and disabled people with broken employment records will, for the first time, have the right to a second pension. Three groups will gain from that policy: parents taking breaks to look after young children; others caring for a sick or disabled person; and those forced to leave work because of an illness or disability. Over time, at least 4 million people will benefit by up to £50 a week. That is surely a better set of pension proposals than those of the Opposition, which would do nothing for carers and would abolish the basic state pension.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): Although I am proud to represent the Macclesfield constituency in the north-west and the north-west region as a whole, I am also proud to be a citizen of, and a Member of Parliament in, the United Kingdom. Will the Prime Minister tell the House why so much of the Government's legislation and so many of their policies are designed to undermine the United Kingdom and its sovereignty? Is the intention merely to soften us up for the Europe of regions?

The Prime Minister: No. We are in favour of devolution because we believe in a sensible partnership within the United Kingdom for the modern world. That is why the Conservative party is now in favour of devolution: the Conservatives have changed their mind since the election. As a result of their policy at the election, they secured not a single seat in Scotland or Wales.

As for Europe, of course we want a Europe of nation states. However, we do not believe that in order to be pro-British one has to be anti-European. That is the difference.

Q8. [62730] **Mr. Dennis Canavan** (Falkirk, West): Bearing in mind the fact that patronage can be just as undemocratic as heredity, will the royal commission be able to consider the complete abolition of the House of Lords? After all, the Scottish Parliament will soon be setting a good example by passing legislation without reference to any second Chamber. Would not a modern democratic Scottish Parliament be degraded if it were involved in the nomination of a few characters to a pantomime such as the House of Lords? Will my right hon. Friend therefore reject such a harebrained proposal even though it is reported to emanate from his former tutor, the Lord Chancellor?

The Prime Minister: As for the long-term future of the House of Lords, we have announced the establishment

of a royal commission and we shall wait to find out its decision. I am in favour of retaining a revising Chamber and having a bicameral system, which has served our country well. What has served our country ill is the domination of that Chamber by hereditary peers, the vast majority of whom take the Conservative Whip and therefore provide an in-built, permanent Conservative majority. We can get rid of the worst aspects of the House of Lords while preserving the idea of a second, properly revising Chamber.

Q9. [62731] **Mr. Oliver Letwin** (West Dorset): Does the Prime Minister believe that it is ethical to have released every IRA murderer without achieving the decommissioning of a single armament?

The Prime Minister: We believe that the right policy is that the whole agreement that we entered into on Good Friday is put in place. I ask the hon. Gentleman, as a member of the Conservative Opposition, to try to stick with the bipartisan policy that we supported in opposition. I remind the hon. Gentleman and the House that we supported that bipartisan approach in difficult circumstances; for example, when it was revealed that, despite their denials, the previous Government had been involved in secret negotiations with Sinn Fein. After the first IRA ceasefire, we continued to support the previous Government's approach when they asked for the ceasefire to be declared permanent and then dropped that demand. We followed them when they included the Washington 3 precondition of decommissioning and when they effectively abandoned it. We supported the previous Government all the way through the process and never once played politics with the issue. I hope that the hon. Gentleman's party will do the same.

Hon. Members: On a point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: There is a lot of business before I can take points of order.

Competitiveness

3.33 pm

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (Mr. Peter Mandelson): With permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement on competitiveness.

The White Paper that I am publishing describes the Government's strategy for modernising the UK economy. Overall, our industrial performance still lags well behind that of the United States and our European partners, despite all the privatisations and trade union reforms of our predecessors' 18 years. Yet a new economic landscape beckons, which will radically change the terms on which businesses compete with one another. As a Government, we have to create the conditions for an economic step change. The White Paper is a wake-up call to the nation to do just that.

The starting point for the Government's analysis is that knowledge and its profitable exploitation by business is the key to competitiveness. An advanced industrial nation such as ours cannot sustain the growing prosperity we want by producing standard products and services made with pedestrian methods and commonplace technology. Others can do that, just as well and more cheaply. We shall win only by developing innovative goods and services that customers want to buy and that use world-class production systems and the most sophisticated technology to keep us ahead of our rivals. We need also to ensure that the best environment for business in the world is here in the UK and the rest of Europe, which is our home market.

The bedrock of that business environment is macro-economic stability. Business hates uncertainty. That is why this Government are so determined to steer a stable course through the world's current economic turbulence. We fully understand the difficulties that this turbulence can cause.

The Government have no illusions that they alone can transform Britain's economic performance. Of course they cannot. It is not the Government's job to second-guess boardroom decisions; nor is the hidden hand of market forces sufficient to secure our competitive success. The false hopes of planning in the 1960s and 1970s and the obsession with laissez-faire in the 1980s both failed. This Government steer a new path: to work with the grain of markets, to use our regulatory powers to promote competition as the single most important spur to innovation; to encourage businesses to collaborate with each other to compete more efficiently; and to invest in the capabilities of the economy, including its skills and technological awareness.

Within this framework, there are three key roles for my Department. First, we must invest in our world-class science and knowledge base. Secondly, we will step up our efforts to convert the fruits of this vital resource into hard commercial success. Thirdly, we will lead a crusade to develop in Britain the spirit of enterprise so characteristic of the United States, so that we seize the new business opportunities that are before us.

The quality of the UK's science and engineering base is the foundation on which the knowledge economy is built. It is the mainspring of innovation, yet university research has been the victim of long-standing under-investment. This Government have acted to reverse the decline.

With the Wellcome Trust, we are investing an extra £1.4 billion in British science and engineering. We also need the private sector to increase its commitment to research and development. That is why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will be consulting business on supplementing the current tax system with a research and development tax credit for small businesses. That is also why we will back strong participation by UK business in the European Union's R and D programme. However, research by itself does not generate wealth.

We must ensure that more research is transformed into commercial success, and that new ideas lead to successful innovation and new products. My Department will therefore switch resources to increase its support for innovation by 20 per cent. An expanded teaching company scheme will pay for 200 technology champions every year from among our best science and engineering graduates to help businesses innovate and to exploit the latest technology. In addition, the Government will offer a range of new incentives to reward universities which work effectively with business. Our target is to increase by 50 per cent. the number of innovative start-up businesses each year from the public sector science and engineering base by 2002.

Exploitation of science and business development is often strongest when businesses cluster together, creating a critical mass of investment, skills and co-operation. Governments cannot create clusters out of nothing, but they can help emerging clusters to grow. In a new initiative, which I regard as of fundamental importance, the Government will for the first time set up teams, each led by a Minister, to tackle barriers to growth of nationally significant clusters, co-ordinating action across Government and with business. The first of those teams will concentrate on biotechnology, and will be led by the Minister for Science, Lord Sainsbury.

Boosting enterprise will be given the highest priority in what the Government say and do. We must encourage more people of all ages and backgrounds to start their own business, and we must help those businesses to grow. I have no magic wand that can create an enterprise culture in Britain, although Government can play a role in changing attitudes, facilitating finance, offering networks of support and enabling businesses to learn from one another, improving technological awareness, especially access to the new digital technologies, and promoting at every opportunity liberalisation and competition, without which an enterprise culture cannot flourish.

First, on attitudes, we will back a business-led campaign to promote enterprise in every part of the country. We have asked the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority to consider how best entrepreneurship skills can be introduced to teaching in school. This year, the Government are spending £15 million to promote links between education and business, and are co-sponsoring, with the private sector, the expansion of the young enterprise scheme into higher education, helping students to run their own businesses. That will build on the measures that the Government have already taken to invest in and reform the education system at every level.

Secondly, the financial community needs to be as entrepreneurial and innovative as the business community. This Government have already introduced a much-needed cut in capital gains tax. Today, I can announce the creation of a new £150 million enterprise fund to bring together public and private finance for

high-growth businesses. The fund will help financial providers to develop the expertise to understand and back growth businesses and new innovative technologies. It will help to create in the UK a far-sighted financial community that will be capable of taking risks alone.

Thirdly, to help innovative business start-ups through their crucial early development, I have set the business links network a target of supporting each year 10,000 new growth businesses. In a modern, enterprising economy, businesses need to learn from one another. The Government can play a crucial role. Indeed, we are full partners in the Confederation of British Industry's "Fit for the Future" best-practice campaign. My Department has helped the Motor Industry Forum to bring master engineers from Japan to advise and train vehicle component suppliers on world-class practice. That has produced truly outstanding improvements in performance. My Department will fund up to 10 similar programmes in other industrial sectors.

To help the regional development agencies in England to promote innovation and competitiveness, we shall provide them with an extra £10 million. We have decided to re-focus regional selective assistance on high-quality, knowledge-based projects that provide high-value jobs.

Fourthly, new digital technologies are the nerve system of the knowledge economy. Electronic commerce will be among the most revolutionary changes to markets since the industrial revolution. I recognise that many smaller firms find it difficult to make the leap into electronic trading, so I am launching a new programme to ensure that we achieve a target of 1 million small businesses exploiting the internet to the full by 2002. The Government will invest £20 million in new comprehensive advisory services to ensure that that target is met.

My ambition is that Britain should, by the end of this Parliament, have the best environment world wide for electronic trading. I have today published a document that benchmarks our performance in the digital economy against our main competitors. I will introduce an electronic commerce Bill later in this Session to take our laws into the electronic age and reinforce confidence in electronic trading. I will appoint an e-envoy to help to lead the United Kingdom in international discussions on electronic commerce. The performance and innovation unit in the Cabinet Office will conduct a study to build on that. I am also developing proposals further to liberalise communications markets.

Finally, if enterprise and innovation are to flourish in the UK, we need greater competition in markets, and those markets need to modernise. For 18 years, our predecessors preached free markets, but took fright at big business. We have already passed the new Competition Act, and we will use it to attack anti-competitive practices, strengthening the Office of Fair Trading so that it can expose all corners of the economy to the stimulus of competition. I will also consult next year on the case for reform of merger policy to ensure that that, too, promotes competition.

The White Paper sets out 75 commitments to boost business capabilities, promote business collaboration and strengthen competition, all aimed at closing the performance gap against our main competitors. In addition, we need to measure how well we are doing. I have therefore decided to develop and publish indicators to track the country's progress: a new competitiveness index. Each year the Government will review Britain's progress against those indicators, and agree what further action is required. A new competitiveness council, drawn from across business, will advise the Government on the action needed.

In one respect only is this a modest White Paper. It is a mere 67 pages, compared with the 634 pages of the three competitiveness tomes published by the previous Administration. The right hon. Member for Henley (Mr. Heseltine) was thoroughly dedicated in his goals, and I commend him for telling Britain some home truths, but still Britain slipped behind. The growl was there, but I am afraid not the bite. Now even the growl has left, and just a squeak remains in the Conservative party.

In contrast, our White Paper charts a realistic and attainable way forward. For too long, a dignified retreat from economic success has satisfied us. Britain has played on half the pitch—inventing but not selling; competing but not working enough with others. Now we are going to do things differently. Government and business will act in partnership, with focus, energy and enterprise. I commend the White Paper to the House.

Mr. John Redwood (Wokingham): I thank the Secretary of State for fitting the House of Commons into his busy media schedule today. When we heard him this morning, he seemed to avoid telling us in advance the content and substance of his statement, but now we know that he was briefing ahead of it—there is nothing new, and nothing of substance, in it. This time, the leaks contained nothing, and the statement contains nothing. The emperor has no clothes.

The Secretary of State just told us that he has published a paper of only 67 pages. Has he not bothered to read the other two volumes of his own White Paper, which comprise 58 extra pages? He obviously has not got around to that in his ministerial box. How can we believe that the Secretary of State has his heart in this, if he did not even know that there were two additional volumes that he had not read?

The truth is that the Chancellor calls the shots. He has stolen the Secretary of State for Trade's garments. The Government's policies on competitiveness, such as they are, were announced in the pre-Budget statement by his right hon. Friend. The Secretary of State once again—metaphorically speaking, for the radio audience—comes naked into the debating Chamber.

Today, British businesses know that their competitiveness has been gravely damaged by the Government's policies. Now they hear from the Secretary of State that, under Labour's economic policy, they have no future if they are making standard products and providing standard services. What a chilling message for his own constituents.

Mr. Ian Stewart (Eccles): Nonsense.

Mr. Redwood: The hon. Gentleman says, "Nonsense." We have just heard the Secretary of State read out a statement saying that there was no future in Britain under Labour for businesses that supply standard products and services. What offer of hope does he have for his own constituents, who make just such goods and provide just such services? He tells us of more money for science

[Mr. Redwood]

and technology, which has been announced several times before, originally by the previous President of the Board of Trade.

Is the e-envoy in addition to the digital envoy announced a short while ago? Will those two gentlemen or ladies be in competition, or has the digital envoy been abolished before being appointed, only to be replaced by the putative e-envoy? The whole thing is risible and muddled.

The truth is that the Government have made it too dear to make things in Britain, through increased taxes, extra regulations and high interest rates. Fearing many more redundancies and bankruptcies, the DTI wants to make it easier to try again when a business has gone bust. There is confidence in Labour's economic policy for you. When the Government redesign the bankruptcy laws, they must be careful not to design a con man's charter. We could not support that.

All we get from the Secretary of State are endless criticisms of management and workers, while he makes their task all but impossible. How will £2.3 billion of extra cost each year for the working time regulations make for cheaper goods and services? How does £2.9 billion a year of extra costs from the minimum wage stimulate jobs? How does £25 billion in extra tax over the life of this Parliament help business to find the money to invest? How can an unspecified amount of extra pension contributions—announced but not quantified yesterday—help our businesses to compete in a price-sensitive market around the world? Does he not see that all those measures make it dearer to make things in Britain, and less attractive for companies to go on investing here or to invest here for the first time?

Will the Secretary of State at least provide some answers to the detailed but important questions that the McKinsey study and the Government's work on competitiveness have thrown up? For example, do the Government intend to make it easier to get planning permission for new hotels, out-of-town superstores and hypermarkets and housing estates in busy areas? Is he aware how unpopular such a McKinsey policy would be in some of those areas?

Will the Government go to Brussels to demand more milk quota to help the dairy industry, which, on the Secretary of State's own analysis, is held back by this quota system that is unfair on Britain? Will he open up the new car market in Britain to full retail competition? Now that he has told the *Financial Times* that Labour was wrong to oppose privatisation in many cases, will he think again on his policy towards the Post Office, and privatise it, or will he tell us how, without privatisation, it can afford to buy businesses abroad, how much he will let it borrow, and whether he has squared that with his right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer?

Will the Government veto damaging European Union plans for a withholding tax and the abolition of corporate tax breaks in Britain? Will they stand up for the financial centres of the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man, which bring substantial business to London; or does the Chancellor intend to abolish those centres, which are so popular with rich Labour Ministers, and lose the business from London and those centres to Bermuda, the Bahamas and New York?

How much will the Government give in tax breaks to new companies and entrepreneurs? Will those tax breaks, such as the small one at which he hinted in his statement, survive the work of the Financial Secretary, who chairs a working party in the EU to abolish such tax breaks? Perhaps her work will be completed before the Chancellor's consultation.

What will the Government do to persuade the British pharmaceutical industry to invest in the United Kingdom rather than in Ireland, which it tells me is now so much more attractive thanks to Labour's tax increases? Under us, it invested here; under Labour, it is thinking of going elsewhere.

The pantomime season has arrived today with the Secretary of State's performance in the House. He wants to play Aladdin. Unfortunately, as he rubs his lamp no riches will appear. The genie has already worked his 48 hours this week and is nowhere to be seen. Perhaps he is stuck at the dome, awaiting the late arrival of the Jubilee line, like the Secretary of State and his officials.

I hope that the Secretary of State will not play crude politics and make misleading statements about me in his reply. I hope that he does not have a pre-planned reply, but that he will get down to answering some of my serious questions for a change. My colleagues and I will go on asking them, because business needs to know where it stands. As he dithers, factories close. As he fails to make up his mind, business gets into a bigger mess.

The Secretary of State has had nothing to say about job losses and factory closures. He has failed to convince the Chancellor to change his policy to help the workers in his constituency. The White Paper is as much use to a redundant industrial worker in Hartlepool as an umbrella in a hurricane. As we face the prospect of more factory closures in basic industry, will he wake up? This is a wake-up call for him, not for the rest of the country. Ministers are failing. Will he now respond to the questions?

Mr. Mandelson: That was a characteristically ritual, ungenerous and extra-planetary response to my statement. We can understand why, of course. The right hon. Gentleman's mind is on other things. His mind is on his job application to become the next boss of the Institute of Directors, which has emerged in the media. It is clear that he has decided to throw in the sponge, or perhaps the bathroom sponge has decided to chuck him. I do not think that that response will do anything at all for his job application, because it will lack any semblance of credibility among business people throughout Britain. *[Interruption.]*

The right hon. Gentleman asked me to answer his serious questions. If I had heard any serious questions, I would have answered them. On today's performance, the right hon. Gentleman will be staying exactly where we want him—on the Opposition Front Bench.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about the economy in ways that most who practise business in the economy would barely recognise. His problem is that he just cannot come to terms with a new world in which the Labour party works with business, and with the centrepiece of our policies being our commitment to enterprise and competition. He just cannot understand that—he cannot get a handle on it—so he cannot respond.

The right hon. Gentleman needs to understand that what business needs more than anything else is stability—macro-economic stability. That is the precondition on which business can get started, can grow and can become successful. In the Tory world of boom and bust, none of the measures that I have outlined today would have been remotely relevant, because none of them would have stood an earthly chance of succeeding with business in the whirlwind conditions of boom and bust that the Tories created over 10½ years and more while in office.

Macro-economic stability is a vital but insufficient condition for business success. Business success depends on a combination of top-quality products and sophisticated ways of making them by capable firms collaborating with others to bring products to market which are driven by strong competition. It is that combination which underpins the policies that I have set forth in the White Paper this afternoon, on which I notice that the right hon. Gentleman has absolutely nothing intelligent or original to say.

Mr. Martin O'Neill (Ochil): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on a comprehensive range of measures which will greatly enhance Britain's capability to compete. In particular, may I ask him about the proposals for the enterprise fund? It is clear to anyone who looks at the difficulties faced by British business in recent years that a major problem has been that of gaining access quickly and easily to funds to allow enterprise to develop.

Can my right hon. Friend give us an assurance that the enterprise fund will be administered by a different cadre of officials from those who are currently responsible for such things as regional selective assistance? At the heart of the new proposal must be speed, clarity and transparency of transaction if businesses are to get decisions quickly. That is the way in which they will take advantage of market opportunities. The civil service and those responsible for administering the enterprise fund will need to be told that and told that quickly. Can my right hon. Friend assure us that there will be a different culture in the administration of this much-welcomed and greatly praised proposal for an enterprise fund?

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his comments. The aim of the enterprise fund is to provide expertise and leverage to get more funds, primarily from the private sector, into small start-up businesses. That is its aim. It will mark a change in the basis of funding from loans to venture capital and equity-based arrangements.

We propose that the fund should comprise four elements of assistance. The first is a more cost-effective small firms loan guarantee scheme. The second is support from banks for very high-technology venture capital proposals. The third is support for enhanced local and regional venture capital activity. One of the problems with venture capital is that it tends to be highly concentrated in the capital city, whereas, when it is available in the regions, there are inadequate arrangements for levering it into small businesses.

The fourth element is support for innovative proposals by the finance industry to meet the needs of fast-growth businesses. The new fund will contain all those elements, and I have very much taken on board my hon. Friend's strictures on its administration.

Mr. David Chidgey (Eastleigh): I do not wish to be considered one of those who are ungenerous in their reaction to the Secretary of State's statement. I should therefore say that, yes, it is high on style, and it is pretty high on ideals—but the key question is whether it will fall short on actions. Building on partnerships between universities and business is, of course, welcome—but will the Government's action reverse Britain's research and development investment record, which has placed us at the bottom of the league? Moves to promote collaboration and best practice in business are, of course, welcome—it is common sense—but where is the Government's action to boost the best of British enterprise through sound economic policies and affordable investment capital?

I should like to ask the Secretary of State three specific questions that may demonstrate the problems facing businesses across the United Kingdom, in every hon. Member's constituency. First, will the Secretary of State, in the spirit of his competitiveness White Paper, confirm the civil aviation research and development grant to the British aerospace industry? The grant—£22 million per year; a vital seed-corn investment in civil aviation and aerospace research—hangs in the balance.

Secondly, will the Secretary of State ensure that his colleagues in government stabilise the pound and bring down interest rates, so that firms such as Carbospar, which is in my constituency, that are winners of the millennium product award—that much-vaunted exercise of his—do not in a moment lose half their projected overseas sales?

Thirdly and finally, will the Secretary of State act to change the investment climate, so that firms such as Lancashire Fittings in Harrogate, which is another millennium products award winner, do not have to take their superb inventions to Sweden to obtain essential finance, instead of employing hundreds of workers in the United Kingdom manufacturing industry?

In a nutshell, in their economic and investment policies, will the Government play their part to help, not hinder, British competitiveness?

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his remarks. On the CARAD scheme, we have invested more in aerospace and launch aid than any other Government in the history of the United Kingdom. I therefore do not think that we need to take any lessons on our commitment to investment in the aerospace industry. I keep under review all the financial commitments and schemes supported by the Department, and the CARAD scheme is no exception.

I realise, of course, the difficulties caused by the level of sterling and the recent impact of turbulence in Asia on manufacturers and exporters. A number of factors have to be taken into consideration when addressing that issue. However, I should tell the hon. Gentleman that the Government will not resort to short-term fixes that would only sacrifice the long-term health of the economy in return for short-term transitory gains. That applies—right across the board—to all aspects of the macro-economy.

I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman that the problem is not with our science and engineering base, which world class and tremendous. The United Kingdom invents an enormous amount. The problem is that we do not have the entrepreneurial climate and the support for

[Mr. Mandelson]

business to ensure that what is invented here is also manufactured here. That is what all the measures in the White Paper are aimed at.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Is my right hon. Friend aware that, when all the envoys have envoyed and all the other wonderful initiatives have been implemented—including the one on coal, which I readily accept is a wonderful initiative—other areas will remain in need of attention? I refer in particular to the textile industry, which has been hammered by the Asian economies. The effects there are seen by loads of Labour Members.

What is my right hon. Friend doing to ensure that we beat off that unfair competition? Will he bear it in mind that the Remploy factories for the disabled face such severe competition that they are losing Ministry of Defence contracts—unfairly, in my view? Will he look into those issues to ensure that, in addition to what he has done for coal and some other areas, we manage to save those vital jobs in 1999?

Mr. Mandelson: I am glad to tell my hon. Friend that Mr. Budge of RJB Mining has today announced the signing of a £1 billion contract for the supply of coal, which is very good news for all those who work for that company. I am having a meeting on Friday with relevant Members of Parliament and trade union officials to consider what I readily acknowledge to be the serious plight of the textile industry. My hon. Friend the Minister for Energy and Industry is actively considering measures that the Government might be able to take.

Like all traditional industries, the textile industry needs to look to innovation, continuous improvement in how it does business, and the constant sophistication of its products and production processes if it is to compete successfully in tough and competitive world markets. That is the message of the White Paper.

I draw a lot of encouragement from other traditional industries that are doing that. Today I visited what could be described as a traditional metal-bashing company. Thanks to innovation, the introduction of new technology and the use of the internet—which Conservative Members take such delight in sneering at because they do not understand the real world—the company is once again able to compete in world markets, because it has increased its competitiveness. Every industry—new or old, mature or high-tech—has to do that.

Mr. David Curry (Skipton and Ripon): The Secretary of State has emphasised the importance of the biotech industry and the need for stability. Will he examine urgently the increasing incoherence that is descending on the regulatory process for the approval of genetically modified products in the United Kingdom, and the real danger that, because of that incoherence and delay, Britain and Europe will be overtaken in a technology that is making enormous strides elsewhere? If we want to be at the centre of technology and development, we are going the wrong way about it in that crucial new area that will affect the whole of mankind.

Mr. Mandelson: The right hon. Gentleman makes valid and intelligent observations about an industrial sector that is growing in importance, and will probably be one of the greatest contributors to economic growth in this country. We should not take lightly the prospects for that industry or its regulatory framework. That is under active consideration by Ministers. We are consulting widely, not least because, if we are to carry public opinion with us on the new scientific developments and their conversion into products such as genetically modified foods, the public must feel comfortable and secure about the regulation of the industries and the use of such technology. They have to have clear information, facts and labelling about what they are eating in the case of genetically modified foods. We are taking steps to create and maintain that confidence and to ensure that the biotechnology sector moves ahead on a stable and confident footing.

However, I can assure the right hon. Gentleman that the issue is very dear to me. That is why I have announced today that the biotechnology cluster that has sprung up around Cambridge will receive support and help from Ministers, in this case from a team lead by the Minister for Science, Lord Sainsbury.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): May I invite my right hon. Friend to ignore the sound growls from the clown prince of darkness on the Tory Front Bench? May I congratulate him on the White Paper, and especially on what he has said about information and communication technology, research and development, innovation and small business development? He will know that Glaxo Wellcome in Barnard Castle employs 1,500 people in my constituency, which, like his, is in the northern region. It is a superb employer, is well regarded in the community and contributes to the community.

My right hon. Friend will also know that the pharmaceutical industry makes a substantial contribution to the British economy—contributing £2.3 billion to the balance of payments and £5.5 billion worth of export—

Madam Speaker: Order. I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Gentleman, but this is time for questions, and a number of hon. Members still wish to speak. We have very important business ahead of us, so I shall only take questions now.

Mr. Foster: I am sorry, Madam Speaker, but I was carried away with my enthusiasm for the pharmaceutical industry. In view of that substantial contribution, is it not surprising that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is not on the Cabinet Sub-Committee responsible for competitiveness and productivity? Will my right hon. Friend rectify that?

Mr. Mandelson: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, and I accept what he says about Glaxo Wellcome, which pours an enormous amount of investment into research and development in Britain. Indeed, if every other private sector company did the same on that scale, we would certainly be in business.

However, my right hon. Friend should not take it amiss that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health is not on that Cabinet Committee. He cannot be on every Cabinet Committee, as he is a busy man, but I know that he has very much at heart the interests of the pharmaceutical industry. He has to maintain a careful

balance in his approach to pharmaceutical pricing, because he needs to consider the investment by pharmaceutical companies in research and development and the time it takes to bring products to market. In considering all those factors in the round and in close consultation with other colleagues, he will, I am sure, reach the right conclusion.

Sir Peter Tapsell (Louth and Horncastle): An hour ago, did the right hon. Gentleman hear the Prime Minister again boast that British interest rates have fallen to their lowest point for 30 years? [HON. MEMBERS: "Long-term."] Yes—long-term interest rates. Will he explain to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor that the reason that long-term interest rates in the United States which were 6.25 per cent. in the early summer are now below 5 per cent., and the reason that Japanese long-term interest rates are down to 1.25 per cent., is that business men in America and Asia are apprehensive about the future and are cutting back on their long-term industrial investments? That is also the main reason for the reduction in long-term interest rates in Britain. If Ministers cannot understand the significance of the key business indicator in these matters, they are most unlikely to get their industrial policy right.

Mr. Mandelson: I am not entirely sure what the hon. Gentleman's question was; it seemed a little confused. I would expect him to welcome the fact that interest rates have now been reduced to 6.25 per cent. That level is in sharp contrast with the 15 per cent. peak in the 1990s, which led to so many business closures. He is wrong to suggest that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was wrong this afternoon, but he is right to say that long-term interest rates are at their lowest for 35 years.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): My right hon. Friend has said that, as part of the drive to increase risk taking, he wants to make it easier for individuals to bounce back from bankruptcy. How precisely will that work? What guarantees can he give that all sorts of unsavoury crooks and rogues who have ripped off honest people will not re-emerge from bankruptcy in a different guise?

Mr. Mandelson: There is a difference between rogue, dishonest directors—who will be brought to book more quickly under the proposals being considered by the Government—and those who have honestly set out with a business idea, but have failed through no fault of their own. All we are saying is that no stigma should attach to the failure of honest business people. On the contrary, we want them to try again, to learn from their experience in setting up businesses, and, if they are so inclined, to try to set up a new business. In offering that encouragement, we will make an important contribution to changing the enterprise culture. At the moment, too many people are discouraged from going into business by fear of failure and the stigma that attaches to it.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan (Galloway and Upper Nithsdale): I welcome the broad thrust of the White Paper, although most of the matters with which it deals will be devolved to the new Scottish Parliament, where the first SNP Administration will be keen to drive forward Scottish enterprise. How much of the £150 million in the new enterprise fund will be allocated to Scotland? Paragraph 2.25 is particularly opaque on that matter. Whatever the sum is, will it be in addition to the existing Scottish block, or will the Scottish Office be expected to fund it from the block?

Mr. Mandelson: I am glad to accept the premise of the hon. Gentleman's question—that Scotland will remain part of the United Kingdom. There would be little opportunity for people in businesses in Scotland to benefit from the enterprise fund if the SNP had its way and Scotland was separated from the rest of the United Kingdom. In so far as he makes a valid observation about the workings of the fund, we will take his point into account when we draw up in detail the operational methods of the fund.

Mr. David Borrow (South Ribble): I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware that the Lancashire aerospace industry—which is based on the two aerospace factories at Warton and Salmesbury and on the many small and medium-sized enterprises across the county—is one of the jewels in the crown of British industry. I am also sure that the White Paper will be welcomed by the industry, particularly the proposal to encourage links with education—I know that he recently visited All Hallows school in my constituency, which has close links with British Aerospace.

Will my right hon. Friend encourage the creation of a cluster for the aerospace industry in Lancashire, and ensure that organisations such as the Consortium for Lancashire Aerospace are involved in any discussions on it? Moreover, will he ensure that his officials are aware of the long lead time for aerospace projects? Although the industry is doing well at the moment, the actions that his Department takes and encourages now will have a dramatic effect, perhaps not in five years' time, but in 10 or 20 years' time, when schemes currently on the drawing board are rolled out into the airports.

Mr. Mandelson: I hear what my hon. Friend says in his last observation, and we will consider his point. I agree about the contribution of the aerospace industry to prosperity not only in Lancashire, but throughout the United Kingdom. The aerospace industry has an important set of supply chains—a series of small and medium companies which supply the industry extremely efficiently, among whom it is important to encourage closer co-operation. The Lancashire consortium plays a role, and the Industry Forum draws together all those involved in supplying the aerospace industry. That may well be exactly the sort of endeavour and model that the DTI will seek to encourage further as our proposals are rolled out. I take my hon. Friend's point about the potentiality of the aerospace industry as a cluster in Lancashire, and we will be happy to consider that.

Mr. Tony Baldry (Banbury): Presumably the Secretary of State can confirm that he has sought to deal in the White Paper with inhibitors to competitiveness. If we are to have competitiveness indices, would it not be sensible to survey British industry on what it sees as the inhibitors to competitiveness at present? I suspect that issues such as high interest rates and non-labour costs would come high on that list.

I believe that there ought to be a wide debate on the matter, and certainly I intend to circulate the White Paper as widely as possible within my constituency. However,

[Mr. Tony Baldry]

I also intend to ask businesses what they see as the inhibitors to competitiveness, and what in the White Paper they see as relevant to them—because I suspect that it will not be very much.

Mr. Mandelson: The hon. Gentleman will be disappointed if that is his view, because all the ideas, proposals and measures contained on every page of the White Paper have been based on unprecedented consultation between the Government and individual business men and women from all parts of the country throughout the drawing up and the discussion of the White Paper. Literally scores of business people have been involved in discussions with the Department, and directly with Ministers.

I pay tribute to my predecessor as Secretary of State, the Leader of the House, who was here for my statement. It was she who put the arrangements in place and decided to involve business people to the extent and in the way that has been achieved. I can assure the hon. Member and the House that, far from being disappointed, many business leaders have already expressed to me their great satisfaction with the White Paper, which they see—for once, and at long last—as the most practical and sensible set of appropriate measures from a Government in 20 years.

Mr. Ian Pearson (Dudley, South): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his statement? I particularly welcome his focus on supporting clusters; the "D" side of R and D; the expansion of the teaching company scheme and encouraging more spin-outs from universities; the new enterprise fund; and targeting new high-growth businesses?

Will my right hon. Friend do two things? First, will he reward and value academics who work with industry so that that option is not, as at present, the third best, behind publishing in refereed journals, or teaching? Secondly, on regional selective assistance, will he ensure that the metal-bashing companies to which he referred continue to be supported in upgrading their businesses, and that they will qualify for regional selective assistance? That will show that the Labour party values the manufacturing sector—unlike the Conservative party, which devastated the sector when it was in office.

Mr. Mandelson: My hon. Friend can rest absolutely assured that our manufacturing sector remains, and will remain, central to our future prosperity and to the Government's aims, objectives and policies. The key point is that manufacturing, like every other sector of the British economy, has constantly to innovate and to bring in new ideas from our science and engineering base. It needs to bring in people with ideas for new products or production systems and new systems for working, because that is the only way in which traditional manufacturing industries and processes can maintain their competitiveness and their share of world markets. Many are doing that now; even more will have to do so in the future.

It is extremely important to reward academics. At the root of the schemes that the Department already organises and that we will refine in the future are arrangements by which academics can leave tenure and go into businesses without fearing that their jobs will close behind them, which would provide a strong disincentive and discouragement. The teaching companies scheme, which produces first-rate technology champions from the academic sector who go to work in businesses, has proved a great success, and we intend to expand it.

Mr. Eric Forth (Bromley and Chislehurst): I warmly welcome the Secretary of State's reference to the spirit of enterprise in the United States, and his crusade to bring that spirit here. Recognising that the United States is still the world's most productive major economy, with an unemployment rate at half that of the European Union, will he pledge that, if he seeks to steer the British economy in any direction, it will be in the direction of the United States and not that of Europe?

Mr. Mandelson: It might be worth the right hon. Gentleman mentioning in that context that the United States operates rather an efficient minimum wage. It has had that legislation in place for some time, and it has never had any adverse effect on enterprise, business or prosperity.

My view is absolutely clear: Europe is the biggest integrated market outside the United States. We want to make that market as open, liberalised and competitive as possible. That is the only way in which we will create opportunities for British business. Conservative policies would cut us off from the huge home market that is available to British business and sink us somewhere in the mid-Atlantic, which would be of no value to anyone in this country.

Ms Sally Keeble (Northampton, North): I warmly welcome my right hon. Friend's statement, and especially his comments in support of the new high-tech industries, which have already proved important in creating jobs in my constituency. Is he aware that many employers, including those in Northamptonshire, say that one of the big barriers to competitiveness is the lack of skills in the local work force? Whether one works in finance, construction or even retail or fast food, one needs some computer skills, so will he say more about measures that will give us a really competitive work force?

Mr. Mandelson: My hon. Friend is right in both her points. The problem for new start-up high-technology businesses, which have a tremendous potential for growth, is the enormous difficulty that they have in gaining access to capital finance in the first place. The venture capital industry in this country is, I think, the biggest in Europe, yet at certain levels, in relation to certain sizes and types of firm—especially high-technology ones—there is an absence of expertise and analytical skills in the financial community.

There is in the financial community a risk aversion and a resistance to financing high-technology firms, which does them considerable harm. It is to get over that prejudice—as some people would see it—or lack of sympathy or understanding that we are taking the measures that we are through the enterprise fund. Through the operation of that fund, we will, as I said, develop a finance community that has much greater expertise and more understanding of that sector, and therefore much greater inclination to offer it seed finance.

My hon. Friend's points about skills are well taken. We are entering an extensive and pervasive information age. The information revolution will touch every part of the United Kingdom economy, and we are doing much to raise skill levels so that we have people prepared, able and willing to work in information and communications technologies. We need to do more, as my White Paper makes clear, and I am glad to say that I have the full support of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in making the necessary arrangements, increasing funding, and bringing to fruition our ambitious targets for skill levels in that area.

Points of Order

4.30 pm

Mr. Giles Radice (North Durham): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Could you give some guidance to the House on the application of the Parliament Acts to the European Parliamentary Elections Bill?

Madam Speaker: Yes. The rejection of the European Parliamentary Elections Bill for the second time by the other place now brings into play the provisions of the Parliament Acts. The House of Lords will be asked to return the Bill to this House, where it will be prepared for the Royal Assent. The Parliament Acts require that, before a Bill is presented for the Royal Assent under this procedure, it has been sent to the House of Lords at least one month before the end of the Session in which it was rejected for the second time. The Bill was sent to the Lords on 3 December. In order to comply strictly with the requirements of the Parliament Acts—and I certainly intend to interpret the Acts strictly—it cannot be submitted for Royal Assent until a month after that date.

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. It may be for the convenience of the House if I say now that the Government will not ask the House to agree any motion directing that the Parliament Acts should not apply.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. This morning, the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions launched a policy document on shipping at 10.30. That document is still not available in the Vote Office. Instead of the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry announcing non-policies this afternoon, would it not be better if the Government made policies that they have decided available to Members of Parliament?

Madam Speaker: Would those Members on the Front Bench who are responsible for seeing that documents are available do so immediately? Perhaps I might have an explanation of why the document was not available in the Vote Office.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. You will have noticed that the Prime Minister in the House today, and the Foreign Secretary elsewhere, have been scrupulous in avoiding giving any information that might relate to any operations that might be carried out in the near future by British forces. In the event that any such operations are begun, may I take it that you will look sympathetically on any efforts to ensure that the House has the opportunity to discuss those matters before rising for the Christmas recess?

Madam Speaker: I hope that the hon. and learned Gentleman will appreciate—I am sure he does—that I am scrupulous about such matters. I take to heart what he says and I think that I know the full feeling of the House, too.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Before this afternoon's debate

[Helen Jackson]

and the vote on the Government motions in the name of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, I would like some clarification on whether the principle behind the motions needs to be decided by the House before any alteration, as described in the amendments, is voted on.

Madam Speaker: I shall deal with that if I am allowed to get on to the main business.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker.

Madam Speaker: No. Let me get on to the main business before I take points of order that relate to it.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. At Prime Minister's Question Time, my right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition raised points about payable tax credits. In responding, the Prime Minister seemed to be answering a different question, on the subject of yesterday's statement on pensions. In order to avoid that discontinuity, would it be possible to have the amplification equipment checked in the recess, to ensure that the Prime Minister really understands what is going on?

Madam Speaker: It would be better all round if all hon. Members—and that includes Back Benchers—were rather less noisy at Question Time. Then we could all hear perfectly what was said from the Dispatch Boxes and from all the Benches.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington) *rose—*

Madam Speaker: Is it necessary? I seem to have mushrooming points of order today.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. Will you clarify whether you will take points of order before you rule on the order in which amendments and motions are taken? Is that what is agreed?

Madam Speaker: I am trying to get to that point so that I can give an explanation to the House. First, I want to get the presentation of the Bill out of the way.

BILL PRESENTED

Sexual Offences (Amendment)

Mr. Secretary Straw, supported by the Prime Minister, Mr. Secretary Blunkett, Mr. Secretary Dewar, Mr. Secretary Dobson, Secretary Marjorie Mowlam, Mr. Secretary Michael and Mr. Paul Boateng, presented a Bill to reduce the age at which certain sexual acts are lawful; to make it an offence for a person aged 18 or over to engage in sexual activity with or directed towards a person under that age if he is in a position of trust in relation to that person; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed [Bill 10].

Modernisation of the House

4.36 pm

Madam Speaker: I inform that House that I have selected the amendment standing in the name of the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). Do I need to take further points of order after making that clear?

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. I understand that you have selected that amendment, but my query is about the order in which the motions were tabled. Two different motions are published in the Order Paper—Sittings of the House (No. 1) and Sittings of the House (No. 2). What appears to have happened is that the selection of the amendment means that the voting on those motions has been placed in an order different from that published in the Order Paper. I understand that the original order would have meant that the Committee's motion recommending that business can be begun at 11.30 am would have been taken first. Subsequently, if that had failed, there would have been a further vote, on the Sittings of the House (No. 2) motion. However, that order has now changed, and the pecking order will be that the vote on suspending business at 2 pm and resuming it at 2.30 pm will come first.

I appeal to you, Madam Speaker, to reconsider the matter, because we are dealing with a recommendation of a Committee of the House of Commons, which I understand was supported unanimously. *[Interruption.]* Well, it was certainly the recommendation of a Committee of the House of Commons. That being the case, should not the main proposition be put before the House first?

Madam Speaker: I have given very careful consideration to this matter. It is a House of Commons matter: I am anxious to have as wide a debate as possible and that Members of the House are able to express themselves at Division time.

What will happen is this. I have selected the amendment as I have described. There will be a general debate. At Division time, the amendment, as always, will be put first. If the amendment is successful, all else will fall, as is clear from the note to Government motion 5, which states that

"the above motion will not be moved if Margaret Beckett's Motion on Sittings of House (No. 1) is agreed to."

Therefore, if the amendment to Government motion 4 is agreed to, motion 5 will not be put.

I cannot make the matter clearer than that.

Mr. Ben Bradshaw (Exeter): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. Did you say that, if the amendment failed, the whole motion would fall? Did I hear you correctly?

Madam Speaker: If the amendment falls, the motion is carried.

Mr. Tony McNulty (Harrow, East): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. In conjunction with my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), may I ask you to reconsider your decision, in the light of paragraph 73 of the report?

In that paragraph, the Select Committee states—and I think that it does so unanimously—that motion 4 on the Order Paper should be taken en bloc, and that the amendment should be put only if that motion falls. In effect, both are amendments to the business of the House, and I ask you to reconsider and follow the Select Committee report.

Madam Speaker: I have given careful consideration most of the morning to the matter. I am very concerned that, on a matter that concerns the entire House and its proceedings, debate should be as wide as possible and that hon. Members should have a very free choice as to the way in which they cast their votes.

By proceeding in the way that I have determined—by putting, as we always do, the amendment first—what will happen is that, if the amendment fails, motion 4 is obviously carried. That will be the end of it.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): Further to that point of order, Madam Speaker. The motion has to be put, does it not?

Madam Speaker: Of course the motion has to be put. We all know our procedures. Of course the motion will have to be put. We have been Members of this House for a long time and we know how to put amendments. When amendments fall, the motion is put. If motion 4 is carried, motion 5 falls. I hope that the House now has the answer it wants.

4.40 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): I beg to move,

That this House approves the First Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on the Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals (HC60).

I understand that with this it will be convenient to take the next four motions—*Sittings of the House (No. 1)*—

That, with effect from Monday 11th January until the end of the present session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

(1) the House shall meet on Thursdays at half-past eleven o'clock, and will first proceed with private business, motions for unopposed returns and questions;

(2) proceedings on business on Thursdays shall be interrupted at seven o'clock; and

(3) in their application to Thursday sittings of the House, reference to a specified time in the Standing Orders shall be interpreted as reference to a time three hours before the time so specified, save that reference to half-past ten o'clock shall be substituted for reference to twelve o'clock in Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration).

Sittings of the House (No. 2)—

That, with effect from Monday 11th January until the end of the present session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

(1) the House shall meet on Thursdays at half-past eleven o'clock, and will proceed with public business, which may include a motion for the adjournment of the House;

(2) at two o'clock on Thursdays, the Speaker shall interrupt the business without question put and the sitting shall be suspended until half-past two o'clock; the House will then proceed with private business, motions for unopposed returns and questions, after which any business interrupted at two o'clock shall be resumed;

(3) proceedings on business on Thursdays shall be interrupted at seven o'clock; and

(4) in their application to Thursday sittings of the House, reference to a specified time in the Standing Orders shall be interpreted as reference to a time three hours before the time so specified, save that reference to a quarter to three o'clock in Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), to half-past three o'clock in Standing Order No. 21 (Time for taking questions) and to twelve o'clock in Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration) shall remain unaltered.

Meetings of Standing Committees (No. 1)—

That, with effect from Monday 11th January until the end of the present session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

Meetings of standing committees:

Standing committees shall have leave to sit at any hour and notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, subject to the following provisions:

(a) on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays when the House is sitting, no standing committee sitting at Westminster shall sit between the hours of one o'clock and half-past three o'clock, except as provided in paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 88 (Meeting of standing committees); and

(b) on Thursdays when the House is sitting, no standing committee sitting at Westminster shall sit between the hours of half-past eleven o'clock and half-past twelve o'clock, except as provided in paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 88 (Meetings of standing committees) with the substitution in that paragraph of "half-past eleven o'clock" for "one o'clock" and "a quarter to twelve o'clock" for "a quarter past one o'clock".

Meetings of Standing Committees (No. 2)—

That, with effect from Monday 11th January until the end of the present session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

Meetings of standing committees:

Standing committees shall have leave to sit at any hour and notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, subject to the following provisions: on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays when the House is sitting, no standing committee sitting at Westminster shall sit between the hours of one o'clock and half-past three o'clock, except as provided in paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 88 (Meeting of standing committees).

Mrs. Beckett: The motions on the Order Paper are designed to put before the House the unanimously agreed report from the Select Committee on Modernisation, which contains recommendations for an experiment with our sittings.

I bow to no one in the House in my respect for its traditions and its history, but I recognise that institutions that fail to change are institutions that die. Certainly the work of the Modernisation Committee itself has been undertaken—or so I thought until a moment ago—very much in the spirit of the best traditions of the House: seeking, if not always finding, common ground; respecting the different experience and different views of others; but nevertheless exploring proposals for change. That was the general spirit of the Committee, and I hope that it will also be the spirit of an informed debate.

Let me begin by identifying the areas where there is undoubted agreement underlying both the work of the Committee and the report before the House. First, I hope that it is entirely clear to everyone that the proposals which the report enshrines do not envisage the House sitting for fewer hours than we do now. Within the same

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number of hours, the Committee considered whether there are ways in which we can use that time and address our work more effectively.

Secondly, the issue of how this place might work more effectively is the overall and underlying theme of all the work that the Committee has undertaken, including that reflected in its previous reports.

Thirdly, apart from the specific proposals on which the House will be asked to decide tonight, it is hoped that, today and later, hon. Members will examine other issues, such as the operations of the Main Committee in the Australian Parliament, which might contribute to further thinking about the effectiveness of our own methods of parliamentary scrutiny and debate.

That proposal for an alternative forum for debate reinforces the point that I made at the outset: the proposals are not about reducing the work or the hours of Parliament. That idea—raised today only to encourage debate, not for decision—is intended to make available more time and opportunity than now for both scrutiny and debate.

Taking the proposals in the report as a whole—those put forward for decision today and those put forward for debate—the House will see that, far from proposing a reduction in the work of the House, if we pursued all these ideas, there might be both more effective use of time and more time.

Mr. Christopher Gill (Ludlow): The right hon. Lady has been at pains to explain that the number of hours that the House works will not be reduced. Will she tell us, frankly, whether she is satisfied that the opportunities for Back Benchers to hold the Executive to account will not be reduced as a result of the proposals?

Mrs. Beckett: Absolutely and categorically. Although the proposals for a Main Committee are not before the House today for anything other than discussion, should the House so choose, they would actually offer more opportunity for scrutiny and debate.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Does the right hon. Lady imagine that the proposed Main Committee would sit concurrently with the House or at a different time? If it sat concurrently, when the House was dealing with main business and legislation, the House would be even emptier than it sometimes is already. If the Main Committee sat at a different time, Members of Parliament would have even less time to deal with their correspondence and their constituencies than they have at present.

Mrs. Beckett: No doubt, in the fulness of time, the House will consider those matters and take them into account. I am not an expert on them; the Committee's extensive discussions on them took place before I joined it. In one Parliament that has tried that procedure, the outcome was not that suggested by the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Peter L. Pike (Burnley): According to the hon. Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), who just intervened, the House should hold no Committee meetings—whether they be Select or Standing Committees—while the House is sitting. That is totally illogical. The Modernisation Committee's proposal for a main Committee provides major new opportunities and is the most important part of the report.

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for that clarification.

Mr. Jenkin: The suggestion by the hon. Member for Burnley (Mr. Pike) is utterly ridiculous. We must clearly strike a balance between the number of Committee meetings and hon. Members' duties outside the Chamber and responsibilities in the Chamber. The hon. Gentleman claimed that as many Committee meetings as possible should be held outside the Chamber because they have been effective in the past. That is a ludicrous extrapolation.

Mrs. Beckett: I did not think my hon. Friend said that. However, as I said before, I am confident that the hon. Member for North Essex has read the report and will contribute to the debate if he is fortunate enough to catch your eye, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

I turn to the specific proposals put forward for decision today. First, I remind the House that the context of the proposals is provided by the earlier reports of the Modernisation Committee approved by the House, which should promote more effective use of the time that we spend in the scrutiny of legislation, for example. Most recently, the House agreed to proposals on scrutinising European Union business that will allow wider and much more effective scrutiny than in the past.

Last Session, we carried the Committee's proposals that more Bills should be published in draft and receive pre-legislative scrutiny. In this Session, for example, I hope that we shall make use of a Joint Committee on the draft Financial Services and Markets Bill and that other Bills in draft will receive other forms of pre-legislative scrutiny.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: If I must.

Mr. Bercow: The right honourable Lady referred to the opportunity for improved scrutiny of European Union legislation. Presumably she is not seriously suggesting that the House will have a better opportunity to scrutinise the judgments of the European Court of Justice.

Mrs. Beckett: I suspect that the hon. Gentleman was either not present or not listening when the proposals for scrutiny of European legislation were advanced. If he had been, he would be well aware that the proposals put forward by several Select Committees—and finally by the Modernisation Committee—extend the areas of scrutiny to the other pillars that were not within the ambit of the scrutiny procedures originally before the Committee. In consequence, not only is a wider area available for scrutiny—including scrutiny of legislation that comes from the Commission—but we have established a different Committee structure to facilitate more effective scrutiny.

Mr. Dennis Skinner (Bolsover): Before we get bogged down in an argument about the scrutiny of European

Union business, I—as someone who spent long hours on the Opposition Benches arguing, night after night, about the common market—remind my right hon. Friend and the Tories that, one dark night, the then Tory Government decided to change everything. They stopped me and my old mate Bob Cryer and some others from arguing the toss about common market legislation night after night—we often kept them up until 3 or 4 am. The Tory Government, backed by most of their Back Benchers who are in the Chamber today, walked through the Lobby against me and my old mate Bob Cryer and sent all the common market Orders upstairs into Committee. At a stroke, the Tory Government stopped our scrutiny of the common market. I hope that we will not have any bouts of hypocrisy from that lot opposite this afternoon.

Mrs. Beckett: I share my hon. Friend's hope, but I doubt that it will be realised.

The House also passed proposals to carry over some Bills from one Session to the next. That should enable us to make better use of time for Committee scrutiny in June and July when most of the Bills that we hope to finish during the Session should be out of Committee, and it will enable more steady progress to be made with Committee work as well as with other aspects of legislative scrutiny.

All the proposals give Members a much better opportunity to scrutinise legislation and contribute to the legislative process at a much earlier stage. That should mean not only that legislation will be of higher quality, but that it may need less amendment, particularly less late or unforeseen amendment.

The proposals for an experiment in our hours of sitting should be judged against the background of what should be better handling of legislation, less hurried processes of legislative scrutiny and less likelihood of ill-thought-through proposals coming forward in a rush and needing vast amendment to make them effective.

The existing procedures of the House can be and are criticised in various ways. For example, and with due deference to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Mr. Skinner), although I hate an early start and prefer to operate later into the evening, I am well aware that the House as a whole is not at its best in the small hours of the morning. It is a fair criticism to say that the longer we go into the later parts of the evening and the small hours, the less progress on scrutiny, and the less effective progress on scrutiny, we often make.

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I bring to my right hon. Friend's attention a booklet called "The work of an MP", which is available in the Library, which says:

> "By the time a Member finally gets to bed it can sometimes be nearly time to begin the next day's work."

The booklet then asks readers whether they think they would be fit enough to become an MP and suggests that they use the House of Commons Gym. Would it not be better for us to have improved hours of work, so that we would not have to go to the gym when we are here?

Mrs. Beckett: I have considerable sympathy with my hon. Friend's point, even though, as I said, I prefer to work late at night rather than early in the morning. I recognise that there are hon. Members present who have served even longer than I have, but I speak as someone whose service in the House spans 24 years, five of which were spent as an Opposition social security spokesman at a time when there was an extraordinary amount of legislation before the House. On the basis of that experience, I can say categorically that, once we get into the small hours or even late into the evening, progress on legislation slows down, people stray from the point and their concentration wanders. Far less work is done and it is done far less effectively.

Mr. Nick Hawkins (Surrey Heath) *rose—*

Mr. Bercow *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: I shall certainly not give way on that particular point to hon. Members who are comparatively new to the House, because lengthy experience drives one to the conclusion that late-night sittings are not an effective way for the House to conduct its business.

I understand the concerns of those who feel that, their own or their staff's patterns of work having been adapted to the present patterns of debate, the proposed experiment in bringing forward our hours will cause problems. The underlying dilemma of how to juggle conflicting pressures and demands is perpetual. It is not created by the proposals, and views both on the dilemma and on its solution vary from Member to Member. Many of us believe, however, that the proposals may contribute to more measured and better-informed debate.

The issue before the House with regard to the proposed experiment is not only when or for how many hours Members are in the House but whether patterns of work that grew up to suit the habits and, frankly, far lighter work load of earlier generations of Members now contribute to us sometimes wasting time in the House rather than making the best and most productive use of it.

That brings me directly to the votes before the House tonight. In its report, the Committee recommended unanimously that the House should be given the opportunity to vote on the proposal initially put to the Committee by my predecessor on behalf of the Government, namely that, on Thursdays, the main business of the House should begin at 11.30 am with questions; that to observe the rule that Standing Committees do not sit during Question Time, they should commence their proceedings at 9 am rather than 10.30 am as at present, and that the moment of interruption of the normal day should be 7 pm rather than 10 pm as now. Since these proposals first came before the Committee, several concerns have been raised about the implications of the alternative timings. Two other proposals were thus considered by the Committee.

The first was that the parliamentary day should, as in the original proposal, commence at 11.30 am but that Question Time should be taken as now at 2.30 pm and Standing Committees should sit as now at 10.30 am. The Committee gave this proposal extremely careful consideration. Those who preferred to make no change at all in the timing of Thursday sittings nevertheless felt that the second proposal would clearly mean less change and hence less impact of change, which is incontestably true. However, as with all such proposals, there are other knock-on effects.

The parliamentary day itself would be disjointed. The debate would have to be interrupted for questions and, because Thursday is the day on which the business

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statement is made, adjourned for an undetermined period. Many members of the Committee doubted whether that was a preferable outcome. In particular, given that the underlying purpose of making any such proposal was to make more effective use of parliamentary time, this disruptive method of conducting the day caused particular concern. The uncertainty made that proposal less popular with the Committee than the original one.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I hope that the right hon. Lady will be fair to the House. It is important to establish the fact that the Opposition on the Committee, comprising just four members, made it perfectly clear that while both propositions should be put to the House, they would not support the proposal that Standing Committees should sit at 9 am and that questions should take place after prayers at 11.30 am on a Thursday. Will the right hon. Lady therefore confirm that, while she has sought to highlight the fact that the report was not, as it were, contested, the main Opposition on the Committee made it perfectly clear that they could not support Standing Committees sitting at 9 am and questions other than at 2.30 pm, which is the present tradition and custom?

Mrs. Beckett: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I did indeed fully intend, and do intend, to make that quite plain, although I might not have put it in quite this way had he not said what he did. I am not seeking in any way to misrepresent the views of members of the Committee.

It is also right that the House should be made properly aware of the fact that the representatives of the principal Opposition party on the Committee made it plain not only that they did not support the proposal that Standing Committees sit at 9 am, but that they did not support the alternative proposal for the House to sit at 11.30 am and then adjourn, with questions at 2.30 pm. It was suggested in Committee that they had no intention of voting for that proposal, should it come before the House, so it will be interesting to see whether they vote for the amendment that they have tabled.

The hon. Gentleman is entirely right to say that the proposal that Standing Committees should sit at 9 am was not supported by all members of the Committee, and at no point did I intend to convey the impression that it was.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I have been a Member of Parliament for 20 years. We have had these arguments down the years. Tory Members of Parliament have repeatedly opposed the idea that the House should meet in the morning. The reason is simple—they have interests in the City which they want to pursue, and they do not want the House to meddle in their private commercial affairs. For once we should grasp the nettle.

Mrs. Beckett: The reasons for the concerns that hon. Members express is a matter for them, and I expect that we shall hear some of them today. I certainly recognise the variety of concerns of different hon. Members about such proposals. Undoubtedly, Conservative members of the Committee did not support either the proposal for Standing Committees to sit at 9 am, as the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) correctly said, or the proposal for the House to meet at 11.30 am and adjourn at 2.30 pm.

Mr. Winterton: I hope that the right hon. Lady is also prepared to admit to the House that, although the main Opposition—the Conservative and Unionist parties—on the Committee were not happy that the House should sit from 11.30 on Thursday mornings, they were reluctantly prepared to go along with it. We were also supported by representations made to the Committee by Madam Speaker—the information is in the public domain, so I may quote it—and a subsequent letter from the Chairman of Ways and Means on behalf of the Chairmen's Panel, of which, as the right hon. Lady knows, I happen to be a member.

I say to the hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) that I have been in the House for 28 years and, like him, have been a Back Bencher throughout. I hope that, in many ways, I reflect the interests not only of Back Benchers but of the House in the standard that I have maintained.

Mrs. Beckett: It is clear that many Opposition Members disliked the proposal for the House to sit from 11.30 am but felt that its doing so, with questions at 2.30 pm, was a better bargain than it sitting at 11.30 am and Committees beginning at 9 am. It is also clear that they did not intend to support either of those options for change at that time. Indeed, it should be clearly on record, lest there should be any misunderstanding, that the proposal for the way in which the decision should be put to the House was agreed by the Committee.

Mr. Hawkins: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: If the hon. Gentleman will forgive me, I will get on.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon) *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: I shall of course give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who is a member of the Committee.

Sir Peter Emery: I am sorry to interrupt the right hon. Lady, but I find somewhat strange her statement that some members opposed absolutely any movement on the proposal to sit at 11.30 am. We were willing unanimously to agree the report because the alternatives to sitting at 11.30 am were clearly set out in the report. If we had all opposed any proposal to sit at 11.30 am, we would have opposed the report. The right hon. Lady should not therefore claim that I would oppose the concept of the House sitting at 11.30 am. There was an overwhelming desire of the majority to move in that direction. The Committee was trying to ensure that that could be done in the way that most benefited the House.

Mrs. Beckett: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's point. There is not so much difference between us in our recollection of what took place in Committee. The manner in which the decision was to be made was very clearly discussed. Representatives of the Conservative party recognised that the proposal might—it is still very much

"might"—be agreed by the House, and preferred other options, but that did not necessarily mean that they would vote for such proposals.

The third option concerned the entirely different issue, which was raised in several quarters, not least by Madam Speaker, of whether the Committee had examined the very different sittings pattern of some other Parliaments. That reminds me that I did not deal with the point raised by the hon. Member for Macclesfield about Madam Speaker's views. He will be as conscious as I am that those views were expressed by Madam Speaker at an early stage, before the Committee had discussed matters with her, and are on record from that time. We took careful account of her concerns and of the alternative proposal that came from various sources, including from Madam Speaker, for a different sittings pattern which I can most easily describe as block weeks, whereby Parliament would sit for a specified period of weeks and would then have a non-sitting week.

The Committee asked the Clerk to draw up a potential schedule on the same underlying premise as the experiment that had previously been considered—that the House should sit for as many hours as it does now, and that it should do so without changing the broad pattern of the parliamentary year as we know it. On that basis, the potential schedule was intended to give us an illustration of what block-week sittings would mean. As the House can see from the report, they would be a move away from the pattern of sittings that has been developed since the cross-party Jopling report almost 10 years ago, and would also increase the periods of no effective scrutiny.

Our examination of the alternative proposal suggested that a complete reconstruction of our entire parliamentary year, including the pattern of our recesses and of the party conference season, would be required for such a proposal to be practicable. The Committee did not feel able to recommend that to the House at present, although some members did find attractive the option of revisiting the parliamentary year. It did not seem to be an experiment that could readily be given an early trial in the House, as it gives rise to much more fundamental considerations.

The ultimate view of the Committee was that the House should be given an opportunity to consider whether it wanted an experiment along the lines originally proposed by my predecessor. Further, it was recommended that if such a proposal were defeated, the House should have the chance to fall back on the variation represented by keeping Question Time at 2.30, although with an 11.30 start in the Chamber, rather than being able to fall back only on the status quo. That decision on the proposed experiment, in accordance with the view expressed by the Committee, lay behind the motions tabled by the Government, on which the House is invited to participate in a free vote. I shall return to the subject of the vote shortly.

I shall touch on two other issues. First, the Committee proposed that, within the pattern of the experiment, consideration should be given to providing a non-sitting week around mid-February, because of the heavy load that all hon. Members carry during the Session from the Christmas to the Easter break. Again, the intention was not to diminish scrutiny and debate overall. Clearly, it will depend on the progress of business whether we can suggest a move along those lines this year. In general terms, many hon. Members would find it helpful for the effective planning of their work if they had the flexibility to undertake other commitments in a non-sitting week during that period.

Secondly, the Modernisation Committee's first report last Session recommended greater flexibility about when Standing Committees could meet and, in particular, that they should be allowed, as are Select Committees, to meet when the House is not sitting. The present report repeats that recommendation, and suggests that a period in September could be designated for meetings of Select or Standing Committees, if their members so choose. Again, the proposal is intended to provide greater flexibility and effectiveness in our parliamentary work.

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): The right hon. Lady says, "if their members so choose." In the case of Select Committees, it is clearly the choice of members whether they meet in September. With regard to Standing Committees, the Government would take the initiative. How would they consult members of Standing Committees to see whether they wished to meet in September?

Mrs. Beckett: Through the usual channels, as I envisage it. Lest there should be any doubt in the hon. Gentleman's mind, may I say that that was a unanimous recommendation from the Modernisation Committee in the previous Session, before I was a member of the Committee. As I understand it, the proposal was not envisaged as an instrument that the Government might use to force Standing Committees to sit at other times. A number of hon. Members were expressing the wish for greater flexibility in the operation of Committee weeks, and the recommendation was intended to give expression to that thought.

Helen Jackson (Sheffield, Hillsborough): In that connection, does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the points that has been frequently raised with us—in the Chamber and as members of the Committee—is that there would be an opportunity in parts of the summer recess to table, and perhaps receive answers to, parliamentary questions? At present, that element of scrutiny is seriously lost for a significant part of the year.

Mrs. Beckett: There is no doubt that the Committee's thinking was that that would create the possibility, should hon. Members want to make use of it, of enhancing the scrutiny available to them during that period.

I want to say a little more about the on-going work of the Committee and in particular about the proposal to which I alluded earlier—for a body analogous to the Main Committee in the Australian Parliament.

Today the House is not being asked to experiment with a parallel forum or Main Committee, but the Committee seeks the views of Members and their initial reactions to the discussion of these ideas already undertaken. Such a parallel forum might be a Committee of the whole House which would sit apart from this Chamber, which any Member could attend and which might meet at the same time as the main Chamber of the House, but only to discuss agreed business and non-controversial matters. Any matter that became the subject of dispute could not be decided, but would return for decision to this Chamber.

Mr. Hawkins: The right hon. Lady will be aware that the report mentions the difficulties in terms of media

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coverage of Committees. Does she agree that, if there were to be a Main Committee experiment, it would be crucial to ensure that media coverage of debates was commensurate with traditional media coverage of debates in the Chamber? Does she also agree that, with reducing media coverage of significant business even in the main Chamber, there are dangers that the media might concentrate on the trivial at the expense of the important?

Mrs. Beckett: Again, those are matters that can be explored by the House. With respect to the hon. Gentleman, I do not think that anyone envisaged that any forum in the House would be discussing the trivial, although there might be greater opportunity to discuss in more depth some of the serious issues for which there is not always as much time as hon. Members would like.

The initial work done by the Modernisation Committee suggested that uncontroversial Bills, Adjournment motions, Members's daily Adjournment debates and debates on Select Committee reports all might be suitable for being taken in a Main Committee, which would perhaps free up time on the Floor of the House and would certainly provide more opportunity for scrutiny and debate.

One other minor reform—which I might, on another occasion, recommend to the House, and should mention for completeness—is that we might provide for Lords messages about Bills to be received when the House is not sitting. I do not know whether hon. Members are aware that the other place already has such provision for messages from this House. An effect of making parallel provision would be that Lords Bills and Lords amendments could be printed and made available to Members of this House earlier than is sometimes the case at present. It would certainly avoid delays, if the sittings hours of the two Houses were different, in messages being received from the Lords. I am considering that issue and may table a motion to create a similar, reciprocal structure to that which exists within the House of Lords.

I am sorry to have taken so long, but I have taken a number of interventions. Before I finish, I must say something about the timing of the debates, how I intend to vote in a free vote and what I recommend to other hon. Members who support modernisation and want an experiment for change in our procedures.

I am sorry that an amendment has been tabled by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young). As Madam Speaker has pointed out, it will be voted on before the recommendation put to the Committee by the Government. I am particularly sorry because the Committee agreed, as it says in the report, that we should put the Government's proposal to the House and—to avoid there being no option other than a return to the status quo should that be defeated—that the alternative of the House breaking for Question Time at 2.30 pm should then be put to the vote.

Mr. Pike: Does not the way that we are voting mean that we unfortunately have to eliminate the compromise, because the main proposal would otherwise be eliminated? Is it not unfortunate that we are doing things that way round, because it is exactly the opposite of what the Committee wanted us to do?

Mrs. Beckett: It is of course a matter for hon. Members to decide how they vote, but my hon. Friend is correct that the Committee envisaged at that time that the proposal to break was preferable as a fallback for the House to consider—to agree to or to reject as it chose—than having only the option of the Government proposal and the status quo. The tabling and selection of the amendment for debate reverses that.

Since the production of the Committee's report, and since seeing today's Order Paper and hearing of Madam Speaker's decision, I have given careful further thought to my own view and to what view I would recommend to the House. I am very sorry indeed to have to say that the moving forward of our decision in such a manner—by those who, as we are all well aware, do not support and indeed resist a proposal for change—places us all in a dilemma.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton *rose—*

Mrs. Beckett: With respect to the hon. Gentleman, my remarks are almost at a close.

I am sorry to find myself in such a position, but I am so concerned that the option to which the amendment would give force might bring the experiment into disrepute—and might lead to its termination rather than to its success—that I fear that I must vote against the amendment. I recommend that every hon. Member who wants our procedures to be modernised and wants change that might be effective in respect of better completion of our work take the same view. I am sorry to have to say that—there appeared to be other possibilities—but that seems to be the position.

I end as I began, by recommending to the House that we conduct an experiment by bringing forward our Thursday sittings. We all know that there are strong views in the House on that matter, and that there are different views. I hope that those different views will all be treated with respect, but it appears that those of us who want the experiment to proceed should vote against the amendment and for the sittings of the House (No. 1) motion.

5.18 pm

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): I beg to move the amendment standing in my name and in the names of other right hon. and hon. Members from both—

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. The right hon. Gentleman cannot move the amendment at this stage. We must deal with motion on the Order Paper first. When we come to the next motion, he may move his amendment.

Sir George Young: I am much obliged, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I can see advantage in the way that the votes will take place.

Sir Peter Emery: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The amendment is to the first motion, not to the second. Presumably, as the first motion has been moved, the amendment has to be moved to that motion.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: We are currently dealing with motion No. 3 on the Order Paper, concerning the approval of the Committee's report, which is not the motion to which the amendment refers.

Sir George Young: There is some merit in the way that the votes will take place. It will enable the House to

decide which of the two alternatives it prefers before going on to decide whether it wants change. The amendment allows the House to take that decision, which might have been denied to the House had we approached the matter in the other way.

I begin by thanking the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, both the right hon. Member for Dewsbury (Mrs. Taylor), who chaired our initial deliberations on the subject, and the present Leader of the House for the way in which they presided over the Select Committee. They both had to cope with a wide range of sincerely held views on the Committee, reflecting the differing interpretations of the role of a Member of Parliament and of the appropriate allocation of available time for our duties.

Some of those differences could be traced back to the different dates of entry of Members into the House, some to the fact that Opposition Members understandably have a perspective different from that of Back-Bench Government supporters'. Other differences were due to some members of the Committee having additional responsibilities in the House. Some have constituencies in or near London and others do not, and some Members have their main office here and others have it in their constituency.

Those varying perspectives of members of the Committee drove us to different conclusions. The Select Committee is not directly recommending this change, as is clear from paragraph 72 of the report. We had a lively but manageable debate. None the less, if I were running a dating agency, there are some combinations that I would seek to avoid.

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): Will the right hon. Gentleman confirm that, although Labour and Liberal Members from the 1997 intake were members of the Committee, no Conservative Members from the 1997 intake were on the Committee? Therefore, he cannot deduce from the evidence of the debate in Committee that people's views were related to their year of entry; they were rather more closely related to the party that they represent.

Sir George Young: I stand by the proposition that I asserted. If the hon. Lady analysed her Back-Bench Labour colleagues she would find a similar difference in interpretation of the role of an MP according to date of entry. That different perspective is not confined to those on the Conservative Benches.

I also commend the Clerks on their work, particularly the section on the Main Committee. I am grateful to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) for providing coffee on a Wednesday morning.

I start by making three general points which provide a framework for the debate. I am concerned at the loss of influence of the House of Commons in recent years. I want to see that decline reversed, so I ask: are these proposals likely to assist in that objective?

Let me read a quotation:

"Our Parliament may have its quirks and faults, but it is hard to find another country today whose Parliament is so central to its national life. In Britain, Parliament is where things happen. It is the voice of the people of Britain, fighting out all the complexities of our national issues which in some other countries are settled in smoke-filled rooms."

That was said only two and a half years ago in June 1996 in a speech to the Centre of Policy Studies by my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), then Prime Minister. I honestly do not think that the Prime Minister could say it today.

Parliament is not central to our national life. The papers have stopped reporting it, the radio has reduced its coverage, Ministers increasingly bypass it, and until recently, Labour Members were sent away from it. We even debar ourselves from discussing some of the live issues of the day.

At best, the proposals before us do nothing to address that central issue which ought to be at the heart of the Select Committee's agenda; at worst, they may even add to the problem, which brings me to my second point.

Mr. Robert Maclennan (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross): As someone who has served in the House for rather a long time also, I should say that the picture that the right hon. Gentleman paints of a golden age in 1996, described by the then Prime Minister, bears no resemblance to the experience that most of us had either then or for many years before it under the leadership of that Prime Minister and his immediate predecessor.

Sir George Young: Does the right hon. Gentleman seriously assert that during the past 18 months there has been no change in the role of Parliament in our national life? If so, he is in a minority.

The proposals received a terrible press in July, for which the Government have no one to blame but themselves. The proposals before us originate from the Government and have been through the Select Committee, and it was the Government who launched them on the public before the Select Committee even discussed them.

On 1 July, *The Independent* quoted the right hon. Member for Dewsbury as saying of the package of changes:

"It reduces the pressure points during the session and adjusts the arrangements to make them more family friendly."

That led to the headline:

"Extra family time for overworked MPs".

The *Daily Mirror* used the same quote from the right hon. Lady to prop up its headline:

"Four days a week for MPs".

The Evening Standard had the same quote:

"MPs set to spend more time with the family".

Even *The Guardian* said:

"Reform plan offers MPs longer break at week-ends".

BBC On Line said:

"MPs to get more time with families".

As I said, all that happened before the Select Committee even considered the proposals. So far from the reforms helping to elevate the status of the House, the way in which the Government presented them made that task harder.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Is not one of the problems facing the House the fact that this is a House of Commons matter, yet we are considering Government proposals? With no disrespect to the Leader of the House, for whom I have great admiration, I am not sure that I believe that the Committee should be chaired by a member of the

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Government and Cabinet. That is the problem. We are debating Government proposals which the Government want to get through when it should be entirely a House of Commons matter; proposals should be put forward by the House of Commons through the Modernisation Committee.

Sir George Young: My hon. Friend tempts me way beyond my negotiating brief, but I shall touch upon his point in a moment.

Helen Jackson: I realise that the right hon. Gentleman was not a member of the Committee in its early stages when it published its first report on the legislative process, but does he agree that the recent report is totally in line with the basic principles agreed unanimously after much argument and debate—not on party lines—and that the Modernisation Committee was about improving the way in which Parliament carries out the legislative process and the way in which it is presented? Because of the sensitivities, the Committee said:

"Our approach is to recommend various options to be tried out always on an experimental basis."

That is what the Modernisation Committee is doing. It has been working on a cross-party basis, and if the right hon. Gentleman is saying that that will no longer operate, people outside the House need to know that.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Many hon. Members wish to speak. We do not have all that much time and if interventions continue at this rate and at this length, many people will be disappointed.

Sir George Young: I revert to the point that I was making. The Select Committee learned a lesson, which was that we should present any proposals for change on the basis of enabling us to represent our constituents more effectively, not to spend more time with our families. The Opposition's press notice last week was a wiser one, with no references to anything friendly or familiar; none the less the media simply looked up the previous coverage and panned the proposals.

My third point relates to that just made by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton).

Caroline Flint: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir George Young: No, in the light of Mr. Deputy Speaker's injunction, I want to make progress.

These recommendations come from a proposition that emerged not from the Select Committee but from the Government. Of course, they are not to be condemned because of their source, and they should be judged on their merit. But any Select Committee, and particularly the Modernisation Committee, will want to develop its own agenda and not just accept the Government's. The Jopling proposals came from within, not without, and went ahead with all-party support. The House of Commons should control the Executive, not the other way around, particularly on this sort of issue.

Against that background, I come to the proposals for Thursday and my amendment.

Mrs. Beckett: Yes, the Jopling proposals came forward on an all-party basis, but it was the Leader of the House of the day who put forward the proposals. Those proposals, which most hon. Members will feel have improved the work of the House, would never have been carried through had it not been for the fact that we, as the Opposition, overrode the concerns of our traditionalists who did not wish to see that modernising step. We had the courage to grasp the nettle and support the Government, even though it was argued that the change was in the Government's interests. It is a pity that the right hon. Gentleman cannot do the same.

Sir George Young: I am not prepared to override my hon. Friends' objections, because I share them.

The Government proposition that we are now debating is in appendix 1, paragraph 11. I should have preferred a much more rigorous analysis in the paper of the then Leader of the House—first outlining the problem, and then relating the solution to the problem—but none was forthcoming. To substantiate the proposal that there should be no whipped business after 7 pm on a Thursday so that hon. Members can get back to their constituencies for a full Friday, the Government should have outlined how often votes after 7 pm currently occur. In the previous Parliament, there were two such votes between the Queen's Speech and dissolution. Between 13 March 1998 and the summer recess, it happened three times. Since we returned from recess, there have been no votes after 7 pm on a Thursday.

The disadvantage of the proposed turbulence in the morning, in which moving forward the sittings of the House will disrupt activities currently occurring in the morning—a matter to which I know other hon. Members wish to speak—is not counterbalanced by a corresponding benefit in the evening. The problem of hon. Members having to stay in the House to vote after 7 pm is a minor one that could have been dealt with through the usual channels. The entire foundation on which the argument for change is constructed is, therefore, essentially a weak one.

Under the Government's proposals, hon. Members also will not know whether they can get away at 7 pm, as the Government's offer relates only to whipped businesses. There could be business after 7 pm, announced the previous Thursday, in which hon. Members will have to take part, whereas they had thought they would be able to get away. The House will therefore face the paradox of rising early on a Thursday so that hon. Members can get to their constituencies, even on those Thursdays when the House will sit the next day.

The case against change is a more powerful one and is made primarily in paragraph 62. The proposed change would allow less time to apply for private notice questions and statements. Statements will also be made in the middle of the day, at lunch time. There would also be the problems that Madam Speaker mentioned in her letter. Moreover, it is not true that hon. Members are currently inactive between 11.30 am and 2.30 pm on a Tuesday. That work will still have to be done—it would be displaced, not abandoned.

I should like to dwell for a moment on the final reason listed in paragraph 62. The Procedure Committee, chaired by my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), is in the process of establishing the reduced pressure on the House, as certain matters will no longer be debated in this place but in assemblies and a

Parliament elsewhere—the so-called devolution dividend. If the House wants to consider greater certainty and less business on a Thursday evening, that would be the appropriate forum to do so, when we could consider the objectives that I understand Labour Members want to achieve without causing dislocation in the morning.

We have to consider the proposal also against the background of what has already happened in this Parliament to Thursdays—which is a factor that the Government have ignored. Moving Prime Minister's questions to Wednesday removed Thursday's main anchor. The 3.15 to 3.30 Thursday slot was always well attended—I think that it was as well attended at the Tuesday slot—after which many hon. Members stayed on for business questions. Subsequently, the Conservative party held its main Back-Bench meeting, at 6 pm, when business and whipping were announced. Votes were then held, at 7 pm and/or 10 pm. Thursday was therefore a card-carrying member of the parliamentary week.

Moving Prime Minister's questions to Wednesday has changed all that. The best way in which I can make the point is by referring to last week's all-party notices. There were four meetings on Monday 7 December; 20 on Tuesday 8 December; 16 on Wednesday 9 December; and only four on the Thursday, of which only one was in the afternoon. As for the Conservative party's own Back-Bench committees, there were six on Monday, five on Tuesday, three on Wednesday and none on Thursday. It is therefore as if one of the two walls holding up the parliamentary week has collapsed. The building is now listing and is held up by one wall instead of two, compressing ever more business into Tuesday and Wednesday.

The proposition before the House will make a difficult situation worse, by further eroding Thursday. The proposition makes it explicit that Thursday will end earlier than the other weekdays.

Mr. Hawkins: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Sir George Young: Yes, but for the last time.

Mr. Hawkins: While my right hon. Friend is reflecting on the changes to Thursday, will he once again recognise that the change to Prime Minister's Questions was announced unilaterally by the Prime Minister? That change has added to the lack of scrutiny of the Executive by the House and by the nation. Those of us who are traditionalists believe that many of the Government's changes have been introduced entirely to bypass such scrutiny.

Sir George Young: I very much regret that the change was made without consultation. I remember, when replying to the first debate on the Loyal Address under this Government, deploring the change.

If there is to be change—the House may have gathered that I do not favour change—I prefer the option that will do the least damage to Thursday: which leaves Standing Committees to meet at 10.30 am and not 9; leaves questions, private notice questions, statements and business questions where they are, at 2.30 pm; and does less damage to the rhythm of the parliamentary week. The reasons for choosing the option are stated in the report, in the section containing the views of Madam Speaker and the Chairman of Ways and Means.

My preferred option involves splitting a Thursday by having questions in the middle and not at the beginning. We could have two half-day Opposition days or a couple of debates on different subjects on either side of questions. Last Thursday, for example, there was one debate on alternatives to prison and then another one on the new deal. Those debates could have been held on either side of Question Time without doing any injury to our procedure.

Other hon. Members may want to develop the case for the Opposition amendment, particularly those who have the responsibility of chairing Standing Committees and are worried about the implications of starting at 9 am for them and for the staff of the House.

I should like to say a very quick word on the Main Committee—a subject that deserves a debate on its own on another occasion. I hope that the Leader of the House will confirm in her reply that there will be such a debate. There are some key questions about the Main Committee. What will be the impact on the Chamber of the establishment of a Main Committee? Are the lessons of Main Committees established by other Parliaments applicable to this one? Is it the right response to the challenge that I outlined at the beginning of my speech—of restoring the status of Parliament in the life of the nation? Is it the right response when other constitutional reforms are under way, specifically reform of the second Chamber? Those are the key issues that have to be addressed in relation to the Main Committee.

I should like finally briefly to mention future work. Two duties are performed by Parliament. The first is the legislative process—implementation of the manifesto, and changes to the legal framework of life. The second is the holding of Government to account—interrogation of Ministers, scrutiny of their Departments and audit of expenditure. Much of the Select Committee's work has been focused on the first duty, as demonstrated by its proposals on carry-over of Bills and on Standing Committees meeting in September for pre-legislative scrutiny. I hope that, in the interests of balance, the future agenda will focus on the second function—scrutiny.

When the right hon. Member for Dewsbury held my job, she said:

> "Parliament does not anymore hold Ministers properly to account".

There are many ways of dealing with that deficiency, some of which are mentioned in appendix 4 to the memorandum from the Liaison Committee. I am interested in taking that agenda forward. The details need not be sorted out today. However, I believe that our agenda should be refocused on the responsibilities that I have outlined.

I hope that the House will not agree to the changes proposed by the Government. However, if it does want change, then change as proposed by my amendment would be the better way forward.

5.38 pm

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): I really do not think that Conservative Members, particularly those who served on the Modernisation Committee, have helped themselves by the way in which they have conducted this debate. I say that for the very simple and straightforward reason that, although Committee members recognised that Conservative Members did not want change, we both acknowledged

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and respected that position. However, we also knew and believed that it was our duty to take them along with us whenever we could, and that is what we tried to do.

For Conservative Members now to speak in this debate in a manner designed to undermine the proposed change sends a clear message to me and to all my colleagues—that we who represent the majority view in the House and who believe that the modernisation of Parliament is essential if we are to preserve this historic institution in which we believe so strongly will have to modernise Parliament, with Conservative Members adding minority reports to our work. That is, in effect, what they have done today. It would have been more honest, more straightforward and more simple if they had done that at the very beginning of the process.

Opposition Members should remember that a majority of the House favours reform, and that we have always tried to work by consensus. It is up to not only the majority party but the minority party—in this case, the Conservative party—to prove that it is prepared to work towards a consensus. It takes two to make that bargain and stick to it.

As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House pointed out, the purpose of the reforms is to make Parliament—not the Government—more effective. That is what we set out to do, although the point has been lost in part of the debate. The fact that some of the press coverage of the lengthy report focused on one or two statements about family-friendly practices says more about some of the briefings that went on, and, sadly, a lack of journalistic effort to understand what the report was about, than about the proposals.

I was pleased, as were all members of the Committee, that Madam Speaker made it clear that, although she had reservations about some of the changes, she and her staff would do everything possible to make them work. We also want to place on record our thanks to the staff of the House, who will also seek to make the changes work. The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) talked about the disruption that starting at 9 o'clock in the morning would cause to the staff. I am puzzled about why the argument is always put that way around. It would be possible to comment on the inconvenience to the staff of finishing at midnight. The argument is not that simple. Why are Conservative Members so anxious not to sit in the morning? There are several answers, some of which have been suggested.

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): From my limited experience as a former member of the Chairmen's Panel, I believe that it is wrong to ask the Clerks of the House to come in as early as 7.30 in the morning to prepare for Committees. It is difficult enough to travel to London early. They sometimes have to work late. We should be considerate to the staff because they give us such excellent service.

Mr. Soley: That is the hon. Lady's point of view, but it is normal in society to go to work in the morning and go home in the evening. That is a standard working practice which is common in Parliaments throughout the world. I hear and understand what the hon. Lady says, but it is not like that in the rest of the world. I am not suggesting that we have to be like others; I am just saying that we are different.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): I am a Member of Parliament now, but I was a member of the staff once. I used to have to leave this place at ridiculous hours. That is unfair. It discriminates against anyone who wants to be in the real world and have a real life. On a more serious note, on one occasion when I left work at 2 o'clock in the morning, I was attacked on my way home. That would not have happened if I had had normal working hours.

Mr. Soley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Soley: No. I want to make progress, because I know that many people want to speak. I hope that the hon. Lady catches your eye later, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Let me put the issue in context. The Government have embarked on a major programme of constitutional reform. I appreciate that the Conservative party does not like that. We are reforming the House of Lords, local government, regional government and the government of Scotland, Wales and London. As a result of the work of the Modernisation Committee, we have already improved the scrutiny of European legislation. We shall have to do more such work. The suggestion that the workings of the House of Commons cannot be reformed is ludicrous. Going on like that will destroy this institution.

I have said many times that the House of Commons has a famous reputation around the world. It gained that reputation in the 19th century and the early part of this century. It began to lose it after the first world war, because many other countries copied us, but they jumped ahead whereas we stood still. The Conservatives would go on standing still if they could. It is up to the Labour party, with, I suspect, the support of the minority parties, to ensure change.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Soley: I shall make a bit more progress and then I shall give way.

People outside do not understand why we have late-night sittings. Most people know that it is common sense that good legislation is not made late at night and that the Government cannot be held effectively to account then. The right hon. Member for North–West Hampshire talked about Parliament being a proud part of the tradition of the previous Prime Minister. I remember, as does he, how the Conservative Government organised their business so that much of it came up late at night when it would not be noticed. We were told that that was supposed to be Parliament acting more effectively. The Conservative Government slipped unpopular measures through after midnight when there would be relatively little questioning and the issue would not get into the media.

Sir Patrick Cormack (South Staffordshire): The hon. Gentleman is putting up an Aunt Sally. We are not

debating late-night sittings; we are having, I hope, a civilised discussion about two alternatives for Thursdays. Late-night sittings do not enter into it.

Mr. Soley: The hon. Gentleman must have missed part of my argument. I was talking about people not understanding our late-night sittings. That is an important issue which is related to morning sittings. Conservative Members protest that we have Committees in the morning. One of the problems that we have to face is that the work of the Committees and the expectations and work load in the constituencies have increased. One reason why the Chamber is frequently nearly empty is that we have a lot of other Committees. What are we going to do about that—abolish the Committees? We have to think more radically and jump over that to come to other solutions.

Many people wonder why uncontentious debates take place on the Floor of the House, often with only a few people present. When they look down on the Chamber and see only four or five people, they ask what is going on. We need to address that. Many people question the unpredictability of Members' commitments, particularly on Fridays. In any democracy, a Member of Parliament cannot guarantee being in a particular place at a particular time. Democracy ought to be unpredictable to an extent; however, it is nonsense to think that we cannot tell people whether we can be present elsewhere on a Friday. Members of the Canadian Parliament can say whether they can be in their constituency months in advance. They can deliver on such a promise in all but the most extreme circumstances.

We also rightly complain about the lack of media coverage of this place. I have regularly been the first to point out the problem, and shall continue to do so, but we do not do our case any good by arranging our debates so that Back Benchers—those who are not members of the Government—do not have a cat in hell's chance of being reported in the media after 5.30 pm. I entirely agree with Madam Speaker and others that we cannot shape the Chamber around the needs of the media, but it is absurd to go to the other extreme and take no account of those needs. I want Back Benchers to be able to make speeches that are noticed in the media. That can happen, but we need to change, as well as the media.

The debate about the use of time in the House has bedevilled us for years. There were arguments under the previous Government about how to change the hours of the House of Commons. Even they recognised that legislating in the early hours of the morning was not a convincing practice for the public. The debate about time is more sophisticated than it seems, because it also involves what subjects need to be debated on the Floor of the House. Only by addressing the problem from that angle can we begin to deal with it.

The proposal for a Main Committee or alternative Committee—we can call it what we will—is important. I urge hon. Members from all parties to consider the proposal and examine how it works in Australia, Canada and one or two other places before deciding whether we should use it here. If the vote tonight goes as I hope it will, the Modernisation Committee will continue to examine the issue. Any proposals will have to come back here for approval. I believe that a Main Committee would enable us to do more to hold the Executive to account, because there would be more opportunities for Back Benchers to raise many of the issues that are not currently raised.

One example that should appeal to the hon. Member for Congleton (Mrs. Winterton) is that there should be more debates on Select Committee reports. Such debates and more Adjournment debates—not at midnight, but between the Minister and the Back Bencher in the Main Committee—might even get into the main regional news programmes on television and radio. Would that be a bad thing for Back Benchers? I think not; it would be a good thing.

Mr. Jenkin: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Soley: The hon. Gentleman has been very persistent, but he had better be brief, as I am trying to save time.

Mr. Jenkin: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who is making interesting and worthwhile points, particularly about how the House might be better reported. My misgivings are that the previous Administration would never have dreamed of using their majority to impose their view on the Opposition on a matter of such magnitude as the timetabling of business in the House of Commons—with the exception of the guillotine. Our problem is that Britain does not have a written constitution. The one guarantee of the power of the House is that such reforms have always been on a strictly consensual basis. The Labour Government are using their majority to pursue a constitutional reform programme that could be described only as a form of elective Stalinism.

Mr. Soley: I have two brief points in response to that. First, if the hon. Gentleman really does believe that in 18 years the Conservative Government did not drive their business through, I must say that they had me fooled for a long time. Secondly, there was consensus on the Committee, but it was broken today; that is a pity. The Conservatives have damaged themselves by that, because many hon. Members on both sides of the House wanted an agreement to be reached.

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. In the light of what the hon. Gentleman has just said, are we debating Government business or House of Commons business?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): The hon. Gentleman knows that that is not a point of order, but a point of debate.

Mr. Soley: I shall let it pass as largely irrelevant to the issues at stake, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

The hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) drew my attention to a fact sheet about the hours of sittings in the House of Commons over many centuries. Of course the hours have varied widely. This has probably been one of the longest periods in which we have not changed them. The House has sat on Saturdays and Sundays, in mornings, afternoons, evenings and at night. It was a flexible, changing institution. Sadly, the Opposition are now saying that we should not change anything, in remembrance of some golden age. However,

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things are never quite what they were. Meanwhile, the rest of the world has changed, as has much of what we do. We have been left with a model of Parliament that is a less than adequate means of holding the Executive to account and of giving Back Benchers the rights that they need to do their work.

Back Benchers have many roles. They are expected to do much more in their constituencies than previously. They do much more work in Committees. I would like us to do more outside the United Kingdom. Only twice in my career have I been an observer at international elections. It is one of the best things one can do and the countries that are emerging out of authoritarian rule appreciate it, but we can fulfil such duties only if we consider the role of Back Benchers, set it in context and modernise our working times.

Sir Peter Emery: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Gentleman, but I think is misleading the House, and he is not known for that. He is suggesting—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman would like to think about what he has said. I am sure that he did not intend to make quite that accusation.

Sir Peter Emery: The hon. Gentleman's remarks could be construed as not giving a fair interpretation of the Opposition's intentions. He is suggesting that, by agreeing the amendment, we would be going back on what was agreed in the Committee. However, without the amendment, the two points that were made in the Committee would never be put to the House because, if the first motion is agreed to, everything falls. The amendment is necessary to put the alternative before the House.

Mr. Soley: The right [illegible] Gentleman knows that that is not right. *[Interruption.]* The right hon. Gentleman intervened, so perhaps he should listen.

More important, my general point related not just to the fact that the Opposition tabled the amendment, but to the tenor of their comments in the debate. I remember working hard in the Select Committee and sometimes being criticised by my hon. Friends, who will cheerfully refer to the stick that they gave me from time to time, for trying to get the Conservatives on board. Suddenly, I find what I suspected—that they would not stay with it. That did not surprise me, but I felt that I had a duty to try to take them with me. When they return to the Committee, they need to think more carefully about how they participate in order to give the Committee confidence that we can work on a consensual basis. If we cannot, as I said earlier, it will be better if we acknowledge that Tory Members will write a minority report and vote accordingly. There is nothing wrong with that and it would save a great deal of time. It is important to have said that, because the Tory party should not be allowed to get away with what it is doing today without comment.

Mr. Butterfill: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Soley: No. I am about to conclude.

As I said in my opening comments, we have embarked on a major constitutional reform which is long overdue. We must also undertake a major reform of the House of Commons. On one level, I would quite like to say that we should make the constitutional change first and then reform the House of Commons, but that is neither realistic nor practical. Today, we are asking the House to try an experiment—no more than that. If that experiment works well, we will stay with it. If it does not, we can drop it, but the request is to try that experiment in order to modernise our proceedings in a way that the vast majority of hon. Members want and people outside expect. Above all, we owe it to the history of this place, which frankly was much prouder some time ago than it has been in recent years, and I blame the Conservative party for much of that.

5.57 pm

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): I start by following the final remarks of the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) in trying to put our discussion in context. I was struck by the description of some hon. Members as traditionalists. I do not know who is owning up to being a traditionalist. It is certainly not exclusive to the Conservatives; indeed, one hon. Member is raising his hand; the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody), who is not in her usual place today, is certainly a traditionalist. Some take pride in that, but what tradition are they seeking to advance?

As the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush pointed out, tradition is all over the place. In the 16th century the House sat in the mornings and had Committees in the afternoons. In the 17th century it regularly started at 7 am and sometimes even at 6 am and was fixed day by day. In the 18th century the House sat at 12 noon. That was changed to 3 pm and then 5 pm. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Aldridge–Brownhills (Mr. Shepherd) for pointing out that on one occasion the House met at 10 pm because hon. Members wanted to go to the Spithead Review. So ad hocery has been the name of the game.

At the turn of the century the House sat at 3 pm. That changed to 2 pm and then to 2.45 pm. During the war, in order to adapt to the special circumstances and to save energy, the House sat from 11 am to 6 pm—quite a normal working day. After the war, it started sitting at 2.30 pm with 9.30 am as a speciality on Fridays, and recently there has been some moderation around the middle of the week. We have only become set into a particular pattern in comparatively recent times, so I challenge the traditionalists to tell us which tradition they are seeking to follow. Anyone outside watching the debate will feel that the issue of when and how to meet on Thursdays is a storm in a teacup.

As the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush rightly said, we should be discussing the wider issues. I shall refer only briefly to the proposals for Thursdays, as I believe the argument is a red herring.

Incidentally, to demonstrate that the power of Prime Ministers has a long history, I can tell hon. Members that the House sat on Saturdays in the 17th century and continued to do so until Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole abolished Saturday sittings because he wanted to secure at least one day's hunting a week.

The first paragraph of the report is the most important. It says:

"The purpose of reform is to make Parliament more effective. This means allowing Members to make the best use of their time, and to balance their various commitments in the House and its Committees with the increasing workload and demands of their constituencies."

The purpose of reform is not to reduce our work load, but to make it more productive. I hope that hon. Members from both sides of the House will agree that the Modernisation Committee has made some—albeit slow—progress. We have sought to find ways in which to achieve more effective scrutiny of legislation, as our previous reports—our principal work under the previous Leader of the House, to whom I, too, pay tribute—demonstrated.

We have also sought to make the Government more accountable. The right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir George Young) said that the power of Parliament had been reduced in the past 18 months and that we had been less effective in holding the Government to account. Where was he in the previous 18 years? He was in the Cabinet, so perhaps he did not notice what Parliament was doing. He certainly cannot have noticed what happened under the then right hon. Member for Finchley, who had an extraordinary perception of the role of Parliament, which she largely regarded as a rubber stamp.

The Thursday proposals are modest. On balance, I prefer option 2 to option 1, but I really do not mind. Let us do something about Thursdays, for goodness' sake. It is ridiculous for those who sit on the two Front Benches to spend all their time arguing about how we decide which option is better. It is absurd that we cannot treat two propositions equally and then choose between them. I hope that the Modernisation Committee will, in due course, consider how we should put different options on a level playing field, as happened when the House considered Sunday trading, for example.

Our yes-no procedures make it extremely difficult to adopt a balanced attitude to the options on Thursday sittings. Both have advantages and both have disadvantages, but they are both considerably better than the status quo. I want us, after this debate, to move on.

I wholly accept the other principal recommendations in the report. A non-sitting or constituency week in February would be extremely welcome, as long as we are given another week in which to ensure that we are not letting the Government off the hook. The same applies to the designated Committee weeks in September. Those weeks may coincide with the Liberal Democrats' party conference, but it would give me great pleasure as Chief Whip to have an excuse not to attend it for one day.

The right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), to whom I pay tribute, drew our attention to the experiences of other Parliaments. A consensus developed in the Committee—across party lines and involving both newer Members and old lags—that it would be sensible to examine the procedures of the House in a Main Committee or second Chamber. Such a Committee would not remove the supremacy of this Chamber—far from it. It would ensure that we had more time to consider those issues that can be debated and decided only on the Floor of the House.

I hope that hon. Members have read the report. If they have, they will have seen the details of the 400 hours of discussion that could easily have been transferred into a less formal setting with no reduction in accountability. That time would be better spent in scrutinising difficult legislation effectively and in considering private Members' legislation. The real bonus of a Main Committee would be that it would allow us to discuss all those issues that are crowded out of the House. A number of distinguished Chairs and former Chairs of Select Committees are present—

Sir Patrick Cormack: Chairmen.

Mr. Tyler: I take the view that Chairs may call themselves what they want. They could be Chairpersons, Chairmen or Chairlords for all I care.

It is important that the work of Select Committees sees the light of day and is given proper scrutiny. Each year, only about 12 of the 60 or 70 important Select Committee reports are debated—in limited time—on the Floor of the House. That is a scandal. A Select Committee report, despite all the hard work that hon. Members put into it, will have only a one in five chance of being properly debated.

Mr. Keith Darvill (Upminster): The hon. Gentleman may be aware that the Procedure Committee is examining the role of Select Committees, particularly in relation to financial procedures. If the Committee recommends a greater role for Select Committees, that would provide hon. Members with a further way in which to hold the Executive to account—scrutiny of the Executive would be enhanced if the Main Committee considered Select Committee reports.

Mr. Tyler: That is exactly my point. To have Ministers respond to the criticisms, concerns and anxieties of a Select Committee that has worked hard in examining the work of Departments would be an excellent way in which Back Benchers on both sides of the House could hold the Government to account.

If such discussions were moved into a forum that is more appropriate—not only in terms of the numbers who can easily participate in the debate, but in format—and if we followed the experience of other legislatures, I believe that hon. Members' doubts would soon disappear. While I was on holiday in Australia, I took a day out to go to Canberra to meet the Clerks and other participants in its Main Committee. The Speaker of the House of Representatives had been one of the biggest critics of the Main Committee when it was set up, but he had been completely converted—he believed that it had enhanced the reputation of Parliament.

The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush mentioned the media. In Australia, the media are as likely to televise an intelligent discussion in the Main Committee as they are the often rather silly to-ing and fro-ing in the Chamber. For example, the specialist media found a discussion in the Main Committee on youth suicide was much more enlightening than such a debate would have been in the more confrontational atmosphere of the Chamber. I am not suggesting that such a forum would be a wonderful panacea, but the House should examine the idea carefully.

I give one example of how a Main Committee could make a major improvement to the way in which we handle our business. The Wednesday morning Adjournment

[Mr. Tyler]

debates are very useful, but the maximum attendance is probably only 15 or 20. If those debates were held in a Main Committee, Ministers could still be held to account, but the House could use Wednesday mornings to consider private Members' Bills. That would be much better than using Fridays, which are a disaster—there are voting problems and great uncertainty about what will come up when.

It would be a huge advantage if private Members' Bills were considered in the middle of the week. *[Interruption.]* Conservative Members are pointing out that the Government would not like that, but I hope that Labour Back Benchers would like it. I know that Liberal Democrats would welcome the ability to have good debates on private Members' legislation instead of having them kicked into the end of the week. That would also allow us to be consistent in our Friday commitments to our constituents. I believe that most hon. Members want certainty in their parliamentary lives.

Sir Patrick Cormack: Is the hon. Gentleman advocating no Friday sittings at all?

Mr. Tyler: Friday sittings can never be abolished because we may always need them for flexibility. However, our consistent approach should be that we only have them when we absolutely must and, I hope, by consensus—not just because the Government have got into a mess in the management of their business.

I do not want to state that the Australian example—or, indeed, the Canadian example—is a model that we must follow precisely, as there will be Westminster variations. Far more legislation is undertaken in the Main Committee in Canberra than would be appropriate here. However, there is one basic rule there that would be helpful—there is never a Division in the Main Committee. If the point is reached in any discussion where anyone at all calls for a Division, the matter comes back to the full Chamber. That is the right approach.

If, in a more consensual atmosphere—in a smaller, but still prestigious part of the building, with public and media access—we have the principle firmly established that those discussions take place without a Division, and that if a Division is called, it is automatically adjourned back to the Chamber, that would be a huge advantage.

The House of Representatives has been very careful to give the proceedings of the Main Committee equal status to those of the main Chamber. It is not just a Committee, or even a Grand Committee—it is comparable to the main Chamber. For that reason, the proceedings of the Main Committee are bound with the weekly equivalent of *Hansard*. The media and the public see the Committee in that way.

I wish to refer to the way in which we manage our business and its impact on access to the House. Some concern has been expressed about the extent to which the public can have access to the House, and the Thursday change could alter that. However, knowing that the public could come here on a Friday—almost invariably—would be a huge asset.

Sir Patrick Cormack: The hon. Gentleman is quite clearly advocating no Friday sittings, other than in an emergency. He wants Members back in their constituencies—so that they can then come back on a Friday to show their constituents around the House. Is that it?

Mr. Tyler: The hon. Gentleman may have difficulty in arranging visits from constituents during the week. I have never had that problem.

There are current proposals for August and September which would preclude the free access of our constituents to this House—a far more sweeping change than anything suggested in the report. Anyone coming from our constituencies in August or September is likely to be charged between £6 and £7 per head. Hon. Members may have experience of arranging visits of comparatively large parties to the House of Commons in August or September. We are not likely to be here, so perhaps some do not. However, for a lot of families, that is the only time that they can come here. It is the same for youth groups, although school parties tend to come during the school year.

The proposals which, apparently, have been approved—although they have never been before the House, as far as I am concerned—will lead to our constituents being charged for their democratic access to the Houses of Parliament. Few people will be able to afford the proposed £6 or £7 a head. If any hon. Member is concerned about public access, the proper target is not the report—it is somebody within this building who has apparently decided that the 20 per cent. of visitors who come here in August and September who are British citizens will no longer have free access.

In summary, it is unthinkable that a radical, reforming Government should modernise the House of Lords in this Parliament to make it more representative and more accountable for the 21st century and not make this place more accessible, more representative and more accountable.

6.14 pm

Mr. Robert Sheldon (Ashton-under-Lyne): The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) adopted a rather more leisurely tone than we have heard before in the debate. I am more relaxed than some hon. Members about whether we start Question Time at 11.30 or 2.30—it is not the crucial issue of our time, and we can take it sensibly. It is only an experiment, and, after six or nine months, we can look at it again. A number of experiments have been undertaken which have been changed as a result of our perception of them. We ought to, as it were, lower the tone of the debate, and get down to some sensible discussion of how we can improve our business.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) rightly said, we must look at the role of Back Benchers and how we hold the Executive to account. That is what is important—not whether we meet at 11.30 or 2.30 for questions. That is a minor matter. I have my own views—mainly because I have seen 11.30 questions at the end of a Session, and they were rather poorly attended. I accept that that is not a good analogy, and I will be interested to see how it might work. I am slightly in favour of continuing the present system.

Like many others, I work here on constituency matters. I have a large mail, and one should finish off one's mail quickly—first thing in the morning—so that the rest of

the day is free. That may make it difficult to have morning sittings. I chair three Select Committees, which makes it more difficult for me than for many others.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: The right hon. Gentleman asserted that we have had experiments before in this House, upon which votes have been taken and which have been subsequently changed. I must admit that I cannot recall one.

Mr. Sheldon: The Crossman reforms were undertaken—including some very silly ones—and a number were subsequently altered. We have seen that happen, and it will happen again. I have no objection to that.

I wish to comment on the role of the Member of Parliament with his or her constituency. My enormous advantage—and that of other hon. Members—is that I represent a constituency. I am the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne—that is what I am known as. I am against lists, because I want to be responsible. I know full well that I can offend an awful lot of people, and it will not make much difference to my large majority. However, that is not the way in which I operate. I want every individual who walks into my advice bureau to lay their troubles to one side, and know that someone is looking after them. That individual approach is important. It is a question not of votes, but of responsibility.

The major problem of this Parliament is that there is a large majority, and the House of Commons is not designed for a large majority. It is not designed to have such a large number of people with nothing very much to do. I have been in 10 Parliaments—five in opposition and five in government. Admittedly—and unfortunately—I have not spent as long in government as I would have liked. Nevertheless, I have had an opportunity to see things from both sides.

Dr. Starkey: Could my right hon. Friend cite any Member of Parliament who has come to him and said that they had nothing to do?

Mr. Sheldon: I must apologise. I used that expression in the conventional sense of the House of Commons doing what it has always done—allowing Members to bring their views to the Prime Minister and leaders of the Government, and to alter the affairs of state. I am not referring to looking after constituents. Constituencies are important, but they should not take up so much of a Member's time. Duncan Sandys, who was accused of not visiting his constituency, said that he represented Streatham in Parliament, not Parliament in Streatham.

I am in my constituency every weekend—that is enough. Constituents can see me, and I can look after their affairs and respond to their correspondence. Nobody has accused me of failing to represent my area, and I am proud of that. That does not mean that Members should ignore their position here—this is where we were elected for. We are Members of Parliament—not councillors, who live and work in an area every day. That is their job. By all means let us converse about the big issues, but Members must not spend too much time on that.

There are 418 Government Members, of whom about 350 are Back Benchers. That is a very large number. In a normal situation, with 350 Government Members, there are only 280 Back Benchers, and they have much greater influence and involvement. When they question a Minister, they have much more power. Now we have a problem, in that attendance in the Chamber does not reflect the voting in the country as a whole, because Back Benchers do not feel that they need to be here. I suggest that an important criterion for judging the success of any alteration is how it affects attendance in the Chamber. We shall see what happens at the end of the summer.

My predecessor, Lord Hervey Rhodes—a wonderful man, of whom I had an enormously high opinion—never used to have anything to do with his local authority. His advice to me was not to have anything to do with mine. That was possible in the 1950s and until the early 1960s, but much legislation now involves local authorities, because they get so much of their money from central Government. I now represent parts of two local authorities, and sometimes they disagree with each other, which creates problems for me, but I have to live with those. One has to represent the authorities in discussions with Ministers.

We must have an understanding of local problems, but not at the expense of our work in the House. This is a debating Chamber, in which issues facing the country must be argued. Poorer attendance means poorer reporting. We cannot blame the press for the empty Press Gallery when we do not attend ourselves. There was a time when *The Times* had a large reporting staff here in its own special room, and all one's speeches were reported; now it does not even report Ministers' speeches. Many hon. Members feel that they can exercise more influence through a letter to a prominent newspaper than by making a contribution in the House, and that is very sad.

The first priority is to impress on everybody the importance of the House of Commons. There is a wonderful quotation to the effect that the greatest ambition of an Englishman is to be elected as a Member of Parliament. With the change of "Englishman" to "Briton", I would accept that wholly. It was never my aim to be a Member of Parliament—that was far too lofty an ambition—but circumstances so fell out that I was fortunate enough to come here. I have never ceased to be astonished at my good fortune.

It is crucial to retain the elements of Parliament that have established our reputation all over the world. Whenever we travel abroad, an assumption is made, not out of deference to us, that we understand parliamentary matters well, because of our long history.

One of the important changes we have made is the establishment of Select Committees. I have been associated with them for well over 30 years, as a member or a Chairman. I well remember Michael Foot speaking against Select Committees and saying that they would detract from the House. To a certain extent he was right. There is no doubt that sending people upstairs to debate important matters means that they cannot be here in the Chamber, but there had to be some way of holding the Government to account; it was not enough to make a brilliant speech and hope to change policy, or to ask a question which could be dodged by a clever manipulation of words.

In a Select Committee, one can ask a question again and again, until the Minister or official is forced to give an answer. I remember my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport, when he was in the Public Accounts

[Mr. Sheldon]

Committee, banging the table and saying, "I've only got one minute, and I'm going to get an answer, yes or no." Those asking questions in the Committee were given only 15 minutes, because there was such a demand to speak, as people realised that they were doing something important. The reluctant civil servant said, "Yes."

The battles are fought here, and the decisions must be made here, preferably with a large attendance, but it is difficult to hold the Government to account with a handful of hon. Members behind one. In a crowded House, one can have much more impact. That is what we must try to achieve.

The most important change that I support for Select Committees is, strangely, to put their proceedings on the internet. At present, reports are not put on the internet until corrections have been made, three weeks later. Minutes of evidence are not part of the functioning of the House. A Select Committee can get real answers from, say, the Home Secretary or the Governor of the Bank of England, and there is a bit in the press, but nothing in the House until three or four weeks later.

Uncorrected minutes of evidence should be put on the internet. I have arranged for that to be done overnight, if necessary. The reporters can do that, but we are tied down by questions of privilege. The newspapers, television and radio can use uncorrected minutes of evidence, but the House of Commons cannot. That is absolute nonsense. I am arguing with the legal people, and I have put some points to the various Committees and to my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House, who has been sympathetic, so I am hoping for some change.

That is important, not only because the House can then consider that evidence at Question Time the following day, but because people can see what has been said, and take it as part of the political discussion of the day. When Chairmen and members of Select Committees appear on radio and television, they are a bit apprehensive about saying what was discussed, because they do not have the transcript. They know that what they say is not privileged, so they are careful. If they had the transcript, they could do exactly what the press and the other media do.

I want draft Bills to be scrutinised by Select Committees. That is important, because the Committees build up expertise that can be tapped. I know that we are putting enormous pressure on Select Committee members, but fortunately they are doing very well, and feel that, as the Opposition—if I may say so—are not doing as good a job as they should, part of the scrutiny is being done by Select Committees, and that is of enormous value to us all. Pre-legislation should go to Select Committees.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush was right to say that we need to see reports of debates. On Main Committees, I have nothing against matters going upstairs, but I am a little uneasy about having a replica of the House of Commons. We used to have Standing Committees for regional affairs in which Ministers would respond, so one could argue the case for certain things happening in the north-west, for example. That system was quite popular. I do not know why it was dropped. Perhaps it was taking up too much ministerial time. We do not want anything too overblown, but particular matters could be devolved to Committee Room 14, say.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: The right hon. Gentleman is making an excellent address, and bringing to our debate a balance and a knowledge of what goes on here. He has highlighted the importance of Select Committees, but does he believe, with the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler), that more Select Committee reports should be debated here, and if so, how can that be done?

Mr. Sheldon: As I was arguing, that could be a matter for one of the debates in Committee Room 14, but there may be other ways to do it. I have already told my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House that I would like to see more debates on the Floor of the House, but, if that is not possible, debates in Committee Room 14 may provide an alternative.

In my 14 years as Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, I have used part of my annual speech to ask other Select Committees to consider expenditure. If Select Committees considered expenditure and concluded that the Government had got it right, nothing more would need to be said, but the Committees do not consider expenditure. I understand the difficulties, because the issues are complicated and the accounts are set out in a way that is hard to understand.

However, with resource accounting, the process will be much easier. For example, child benefit and other expenditure will be entered as an element in resource accounting, and Government programmes will be expressed in terms of money, so that the relevant Select Committee can consider the programme and relate it to the amount spent. Select Committees cannot do that now, because the accounts are expressed in staff or stationery costs. If programmes can be examined by reference to their cost, that becomes an important issue to consider.

We are discussing a trial scheme, and the test of it will be attendance. If such sittings are well attended, I will support a permanent change, but if they are not, we will have to think again.

6.32 pm

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) on his remarks. I found myself unable to disagree with almost anything he said. He is a man of great experience, and new Members should pay particular attention to his comments. I also congratulate the Leader of the House on the way that she acted as the Chairman of the Committee. She did so with charm and understanding, and she put up with one or two of us who might not be the easiest Members to control in a Committee. She did so admirably, and the House should recognise that.

We sometimes do not achieve a proper debate in the House, but in following the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, I wish to highlight one of the issues he raised—the lack of attendance in the House. One innovation has reduced the numbers of Members attending the Chamber and the time that Members spend here: in every Member's office is a television set, so that we can all see what is going on in the Chamber. Members can sit in their offices, and do not need to be on the green leather Benches. Members have often said to me, "I saw

what was happening in the Chamber on the television, and I thought that I had better come in." They should have been here from the start, but unfortunately that modern and convenient asset has done much to empty the Chamber.

In future, I hope that the Committee will consider one simple change that would assist us in holding the Executive to account. We should ensure that written parliamentary questions could be tabled when the House is not sitting. They would not have to be answered every day, but perhaps they could be answered and published in *Hansard* once a week or twice a month. Members often want to be able to put questions to Ministers during, for example, the summer recess or the Christmas break. If bombing were to be carried out in Iraq and the House were not recalled, Members would have a hundred and one questions to put to Ministers. The Executive would not be held properly to account if those questions were not answered until 11 January. We should find a way in which written questions can be put and answered when the House is not sitting.

We have heard some argument to the effect that the Committee's report was unanimous, and that it was unfair of the Opposition to table an amendment. It was a unanimous report, but paragraphs 72 and 73 make it clear that there are two aspects for consideration. Motion 5, tabled by the Leader of the House, can be considered only if there is an amendment. The concept that motion 4 will be defeated is nonsense. Once it is passed, motion 5 falls, and the House loses the opportunity to choose between (a) and (b), but the Committee intended that it should be able to choose.

Mrs. Beckett: I am sorry to have to take issue with the right hon. Gentleman, especially in view of his kind remarks about me, which I much appreciate. I have heard several Conservative Members muttering about choice, and it seems to have escaped their notice that, if the amendment they have tabled were to be carried, there would be no opportunity for the proposal in motion 4 to be put to the House. Only one motion can be carried, as one will knock out the other. The matter is quite straightforward.

Sir Peter Emery: I am delighted that I gave way, because I wish to clear the matter up. The right hon. Lady appears not to be entirely au fait with the procedures of the House. If motion 4 were passed and no amendment had been tabled, the House would have no opportunity to consider the alternative, because every other motion would fall. However, if the amendment to motion 4 is put, the Government are in a clear position to defeat it, and then motion 4 will be put—as the right hon. Lady desires—unamended. That is as simple as can be.

Mrs. Beckett *indicated dissent.*

Sir Peter Emery: The right hon. Lady shakes her head, but which point does she not understand? If the House wishes to consider the possibility of questions at 2.30 and Standing Committees not meeting at 9 am, the only way in which that can be done—given the procedure adopted by the Government—is to defeat the Government's first motion.

Mrs. Beckett: With great respect to the right hon. Gentleman, what the Government did was give effect to the decision of the Committee, which was that, first, the House would consider the experimental proposal by the Government. If that were defeated, the House would consider the alternative. I can understand it if Conservative Members have thought better of that proposition, but they assented to it in Committee, and that is why the Government have tabled the motions as we have.

Sir Peter Emery: I have—*[Interruption.]* If I may continue, I must tell the Leader of the House that, if that is what she was saying, the Select Committee was misled. *[Interruption.]* I should like to finish. I can deal with only one intervention at a time. The Committee was determined to ensure that two options should be available to the House. If I had believed that we would not be able to debate the alternative, and that the Government would table the motions in the way they have, I would have objected to the whole report.

The Committee went to great lengths to ensure that two options would be available. My colleagues on the Committee certainly took the view that we should have the opportunity to allow the House to vote on which alternative it wanted. That was my interpretation.

Mr. Tyler: I have not signed the Official Secrets Act, so I do not think I am betraying any great confidence by saying that I put a proposition to the Committee when it appeared to have reached an impasse. I proposed, simply, that, once the two options were before the House, we should be able to deal with them sequentially, so that there would be a clear choice.

That is precisely what the Leader of the House has done. She has put the main recommendation of the Committee on the Order Paper. If hon. Members think that the second motion is better, they may, quite simply, vote down motion 4, and vote for motion 5. All that those on the Opposition Front Bench, and one or two curious allies, have done is try to reverse that process. I cannot think it a sensible use of our time to argue that point. Let us get on with the debate, and then we can decide on alternative 1 or alternative 2.

Sir Peter Emery: I have never had a high opinion of what the Liberal Democrats say about the right way of dealing with things. It is immensely important to understand that, without the amendment being tabled, the House would have had no chance to show by a vote the number of hon. Members who want the alternative rather than the Government's option. To anyone who believes, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) appears to do, that we can vote down the first motion, I can only say, "Come into the real world." The chances of defeating a Government motion are negligible.

Mrs. Beckett: With the greatest possible respect to the right hon. Gentleman—and with a promise not even to attempt to intervene on him again—may I remind him that, as members of the Committee will be well aware, Opposition Members so little supported the notion of an experiment that they were not going to vote for the proposition at all? How the opinion of the House would have been reflected in that way, I do not know.

Sir Peter Emery: I did not attend the last meeting of the Committee, but there was no doubt that the majority

[Sir Peter Emery]

wanted to change to meeting at 11.30 am. I accept that, and, as a pragmatist, I know that there is no way in which that change can be defeated.

The House has not even started to consider the difficulties of the Government's motion. Standing Committees would meet at 9 am. It is all very well to say that people go to work in an office or something like that at 9 am, but the preparation of the work of Standing Committees is pretty rushed for the Clerks even if they are to be ready for a 10.30 am start. Any amendments tabled up to the closing of the House the night before must be marshalled, got to the printers and prepared for the Committee. If that is to be done in the morning before the Committee sits, the staff will have to come in not at 9 am or at 8.30 am, but at any time from 6 am. Does that make sense? Are the Government really happy to force that on our staff? It is wrong.

No one has considered what the Government motion means to the way in which the House operates.

Dr. Starkey: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Sir Peter Emery: This must be the last time.

Dr. Starkey: I am a little behind hand, but I was trying to find a reference in the report. The right hon. Gentleman has talked of the difficulties for staff in preparing for Standing Committees. Can he confirm what paragraph 50 of the report says? It makes it clear:

"If the standing committees were to meet as early as 9.00 am, we think it would be desirable to impose an earlier cut-off time for the timetabling of amendments, so that the papers for a Thursday morning meeting could me made generally available on a Wednesday evening."

Sir Peter Emery: I understand that that is a simple statement, but what would the hon. Lady do if a Standing Committee sat until 7 or 8 pm? Could there be an earlier cut-off time? The Committee would not be able to discuss amendments that had arisen from debate if that were so. I do not see that that makes any sense at all.

Sir Geoffrey Johnson Smith (Wealden): It would reduce the power of the Committee.

Sir Peter Emery: It would, as my right hon. Friend so rightly says, reduce the power of the Committee.

Let me turn to what the proposals mean to the work of the House. If we meet at 11.30 am on a Thursday, questions will run until 12.30 pm. We shall then have the business statement, which will run, under normal circumstances, until about 1 pm or 1.15 pm. Is that the moment at which Ministers or Opposition Front-Bench spokesmen will wish to stand up to make the main speech on the debate of the day? Will they want to do that in the middle of the lunch hour? Is that sensible? Is that what people want? Is that what Ministers really want? I do not think so. It has not been fully thought out.

The amendment would simply make it certain that our Standing Committees can continue as normal from 11.30 am until 1 pm.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: Ten-thirty.

Sir Peter Emery: From 10.30 am until 1 pm. If we began at 11.30 am, we could have the main speeches of a debate. We could then break for questions at 2.30 pm, having had our Standing Committees meet as normal. After that, any statement could be made.

That does not alter the revolutionary factor of change. It has been suggested that the amendment is an attempt to defeat the whole modernisation of the House. It does no such thing. It ensures that the House can operate more sensibly and reasonably, for the convenience of hon. Members. When it was suggested in Committee that the Conservatives were always against change, I reminded hon. Members that I spent my 14 years as Chairman of the Select Committee on Procedure trying to drag procedures into the 20th century, never mind the 21st.

The Jopling Committee was Conservative led, and proposals went to it rather than the Procedure Committee, so that senior Labour Members could deal with them. That Committee was unanimous, but its recommendations were delayed for two and a half years—not by the Conservatives, but by the then Deputy Chief Whip of the Labour party, who objected to any modernisation and change. The Conservative Government could have forced change with their majority, but they chose not to do so, because the Conservative party has always believed in carrying the vast majority of the House rather than forcing procedural change over substantial opposition.

Mr. Derek Foster (Bishop Auckland): The right hon. Gentleman labours under a grave misapprehension. He and I have been in this place a long time, and he is immensely experienced. We sat together on the Select Committee on Trade and Industry when God was a lad, and he was a distinguished Chairman of the Procedure Committee. However, I must tell him that it was not the Deputy Chief Whip who frustrated him. My deputy was acting on my authority, as I was the Chief Whip at that time; I conceded only when it was obvious that my party would win the election, and that it would be to our advantage to have shorter hours. I thought that that was a good negotiating posture.

I have immense respect for the right hon. Gentleman's arguments, and I urge my younger colleagues not to dismiss them as though they were being made by a man who does not know what he is talking about. The right hon. Gentleman knows a great deal about these matters, and we should listen carefully to him.

Sir Peter Emery: I am most grateful to the former Labour Chief Whip, who is equally distinguished, and a man of great character. A man who can get up and take the blame, which is normally passed on to his deputy, and say that it was him and not the deputy, is a man worthy of great respect. For the right hon. Gentleman to say that the only reason for Labour's agreement was party political is to admit more than I would ever have suggested was behind that agreement.

Let me now discuss the possibility of having a Main Committee or some other Committee. After many years here, I believe that any action that detracted from the importance of the House—the Floor of this Chamber—must be deprecated. However, having said that, I believe that we have to find another way of dealing with some of the mass of matters that—because of pressure of time and because we do not want to sit after midnight so that everybody can speak—are not currently debated, especially reports of Select Committees and the individual private Members' motions that were once a feature of Fridays in the House but have now disappeared.

I acknowledge the possibility of a Main Committee, as long as it does not detract from the Chamber, enabling a whole host of matters which are no longer debated by the House to be considered. If that is what would happen, the proposal is worthy of close consideration.

I finish rather as the Leader of the House finished. The right hon. Lady said that she found it most difficult that the Opposition had tabled an amendment to her motion; and that it was with some sadness that she had to advise the House to vote against the amendment and for her motion. May I suggest that, if there had been no amendment, she would have urged her colleagues to vote for her motion—motion 4? I believe that she would have done so.

Mrs. Beckett *indicated assent.*

Sir Peter Emery: The right hon. Lady nods. If that had been the case, the House would never have had the opportunity of deciding whether the arguments that I have advanced ought to be tested in a Division.

In an early-day motion, 48 hon. Members—a considerable number—have urged that the House should not move away from having questions at 2.30 pm. It is interesting to note that, almost without exception, the Chairmen's Panel perceives no terrible difficulty being caused to the modernisation by holding to 11.30 am and 2.30 pm. I urge hon. Members to think much more fully, not about the glib party political aspects, but about the working of the House. It is the working of the House in which I am interested. If it is passed, the motion will not help the working of the House—in fact, the reverse is true.

6.54 pm

Dr. Phyllis Starkey (Milton Keynes, South-West): I hope that the right hon. Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) accepts that all of us are concerned about the working of the House; it is just that we have different opinions about how to make the House work best.

I sat through the start of the debate when Opposition Members were making great play of the fact that the public should have respect for Parliament. I agree, but have to tell them that they are completely out of touch with the public. The public would not find it unreasonable that people should sometimes be asked to come to work at 7.30 am. The reason why doing so in London is difficult is that the vast majority of people in London are coming to work at precisely that time. The public do not find it reasonable that the House should habitually work in the Chamber from 2.30 pm to 10.30 pm, or beyond; nor, if they realised it, would they find it reasonable that sometimes debates are kept going artificially until 10 pm, because hon. Members—on both sides—are attending important dinners and cannot get back until 10 pm.

The public would not think unreasonable the notion that both staff and Members of Parliament have families and family commitments. I know that one member of the Committee is fortunate enough to have his spouse here, but most of us are not in that position.

Mrs. Ann Winterton: Would the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Dr. Starkey: Certainly.

Mrs. Winterton: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. May I ask, first and foremost, on what she bases her research into what the people out there want? I have not had a raft of letters suggesting that we should come to work at 9 am.

Secondly, if she and other hon. Members wanted a nine-to-five job, perhaps they should not have stood for Parliament. It is the greatest honour to represent constituents in this place; it is a way of life and not just a job.

Finally, I should like to point out that I did 12 years as a wife living in the constituency and bringing up children—the best job that any woman can do. I was able to do that while my husband was a Member of Parliament and, subsequently, I was able to join him in Parliament. Perhaps hon. Members should think of their constituents first, rather than their own way of life.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The debate is in danger of becoming a little personal. It is better that the subject is dealt with in the round.

Dr. Starkey: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Suffice it to say that I acknowledge that my constituents mostly talk to me about matters of direct concern to them; but when they talk about Parliament they find it extraordinary that we work in a way that is completely alien to the workings of any other organisation in the country. The way in which we work does not enhance my constituents' respect for Parliament. Most members of the public would find it extraordinary that hon. Members should suggest that lunch time is an immutable event that occurs between 1 pm and 2 pm; that no change can be accommodated; and that it is more important than the efficient working of the House.

As my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House and my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) said, the Modernisation Committee's report and the Committee's raft of previous recommendations have all been aimed at ensuring that the House works more effectively. The recommendations relating to draft legislation, the scrutiny of European legislation, the conduct of debates and setting time limits on speeches to allow more hon. Members to participate are all designed to reform parliamentary procedure so that we can be more effective. Procedures should be designed to be helpful: that is what they were designed to be, but the House has changed and procedures need to be changed too; they should not make life more difficult or make it more complicated for Members of Parliament to participate in debate.

I agree that the essential job of a Member of Parliament when at Westminster remains to legislate, to scrutinise and to hold the Government to account. However, the way in which we do that needs to change, and the measures that the Committee has suggested would achieve that. A balance has to be struck between Members' duties here in Westminster, in their constituency and as people.

I am sorry that my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) appeared to attempt to outline the job description of a Member of Parliament. All hon. Members do their jobs in different ways, which is absolutely right. We are accountable to our electors for the way in which we balance our activities. I do not think any hon. Member should set down a pattern of activity balancing constituency duties with parliamentary responsibilities in Westminster, and imply that every

[Dr. Starkey]

hon. Member should follow it. My right hon. Friend quoted the aphorism—which the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) mentioned frequently in Committee—about Members of Parliament being at Westminster to represent their constituencies and not in their constituencies to represent Westminster. That is an aphorism, and repeating it often does not make it true. I do not think it is true, as I believe that Members of Parliament have dual roles.

Mr. Sheldon: I agree that that saying is often repeated, but I quoted the original.

Dr. Starkey: I understand that. My constituents believe that the role of a Member of Parliament is twofold: first, hon. Members must represent their constituencies; and, secondly, they should represent Westminster in their constituencies and form a vital link between the two. If former Conservative Members who lost their seats at the last election had been more effective links, explaining to their constituents what was happening in Westminster, some of them might still be here.

Mr. Derek Foster: My hon. Friend is speaking total unmitigated rubbish. When the swing is against a Member of Parliament, it does not matter how good he or she is. My hon. Friend will realise that when she has been here a bit longer. Some superb Conservative Members of Parliament disappeared at the last election not through any fault of their own, but because the political swing was against them. Those of us who have been around a bit know also that many of my hon. Friends will not be here after the next election, no matter how good they are at their jobs. It has nothing to do with one's effectiveness as a Member of Parliament: I am afraid that it depends on the swing of the political pendulum.

Dr. Starkey: My right hon. Friend is entitled to his opinion.

Mrs. Beckett: I have great respect and affection for my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), the former Chief Whip. However, he will be as aware as I am that, although his remarks are true in the sense that many hon. Members of good record lose their positions in this place through no fault of their own, the kind of service to constituents that my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) has just described is extremely pertinent in the case of hon. Members who represent marginal seats.

Dr. Starkey: I am grateful for the support of the Leader of the House. My right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland is entitled to his opinion. *[Interruption.]* I am afraid that you have not read the first report of the Modernisation Committee.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. May I assist the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey)? I hope that she will not find it irritating to learn that we try to address each other in the third person in this place. We say not "you" but "the hon. Member" or "my hon. Friend" or "my right hon. Friend."

Dr. Starkey: My right hon. Friend is entitled to his opinion and I hope that he will accept that I am entitled to mine. It is for others to decide who is right.

Mr. Derek Foster: One of my very good colleagues, the former Member for Keighley, who was killed in a road accident, always stood for a marginal seat—and did so from the Floor of the House. If I called a vote at 4 am to see who was here, he would always appear. He always won his marginal seat because he fought for it from this place. He did not return to his constituency as often as many of my colleagues returned to theirs.

Dr. Starkey: I do not find that argument particularly convincing. The evidence is in my postbag that my constituents appreciate—

Mrs. Beckett: I am afraid that my right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland is wrong. The former Member for Keighley did not always hold his seat. He left this place and then returned to represent a different constituency.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry to delay the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West but I think it might assist the debate—for which there is limited time—if we made some progress.

Dr. Starkey: I shall move on to my next point, which I hope will not be quite so contentious.

Members of Parliament are also people. Whereas it was the norm 50 years ago that Members of Parliament were men whose wives stayed at home and looked after their families, that is not the case today. Fortunately, a considerable number of Members of Parliament are women and even more Members of Parliament reflect the more modern pattern of family relationships in which men and women share domestic responsibilities. It is not unreasonable that we should take account of that arrangement in the House. I do not think it is sensible for the Government to tell employers to take account of the fact that their employees are people with family commitments or to profess support for the family, and then expect individuals—men or women—to work the sort of hours that are completely inconsistent with their demonstrating any commitment to their families. Those points were rehearsed in the innumerable letters to the Committee as reasons for changing the parliamentary calendar, and the Select Committee report has attempted to respond to them.

I shall try to move on quickly. I wish to refute the assertion made by the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young), who opened for the Opposition, regarding the so-called "devolution dividend". I think it is a matter of debate as to whether the establishment of a Scottish Parliament and a Welsh Assembly will reduce the volume of business that comes before the House. However, it is absolutely irrefutable that, although we wish to discuss a huge amount of business in this place, we do not have time to do so.

Select Committee reports are the most obvious example. Statistics show that only 10 per cent. of Select Committee reports are debated or simply mentioned

in debate. It seems to me to be a gross misuse of the enormous effort and expertise that is devoted to producing those reports that 90 per cent. of them are never discussed or referred to in the House. Notwithstanding the existence of the European scrutiny Committees, there is pressure for more time to debate European legislation on the Floor of the House. I understand that there are about eight times as many requests for Adjournment debates as there is time for them.

Ministerial statements are made about important policy matters. However, I would have welcomed a ministerial statement, for example, on the paper produced a considerable time ago about water charging. That policy has now been expressed in legislation, but a ministerial statement at that time would have allowed hon. Members to express their views about the paper well in advance of the introduction of legislation. That was not possible as there was severe time pressure on the business of the House and that subject was not deemed sufficiently important. Even if there is a devolution dividend, I think it will be more than compensated for by the huge amount of other business that the House will want to discuss. The so-called devolution dividend is a red herring.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) said that he was not fussed as to whether Question Time occurred at the beginning or in the middle of Thursdays. I am very fussed about that because it will make a huge difference. The proposal to move business on Thursdays forward by three hours en bloc while retaining its present order is designed to make the House work more effectively. Several hon. Members referred to the fact that Thursdays have been downgraded. I do not believe that that is because Prime Minister's questions have been moved to Wednesday. I think it is because, although Thursday business continues until 10 pm, we are mindful of the fact that hon. Members wish to return to their constituencies. There is therefore enormous pressure on the Government to schedule slightly less important business—if I may put it that way—for debate on Thursdays so that votes do not take place late at night. The consequence is that Thursdays are badly used.

The proposal put forward by the Leader of the House—that we move everything forward by three hours—would effectively recover Thursdays as sensible days for serious parliamentary business. That would reduce the pressure on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and allow us to have three full days of business in a week, which, in turn, would reduce the probability of the Government's having to timetable serious business after 10 o'clock, as occasionally happens on Tuesdays and Wednesdays. We would therefore be much more likely to finish at 10 o'clock on those days. We could deal with serious business—Government or Opposition—on Thursdays.

That is why the Conservative party's suggestion that we should have questions at 2.30 pm is effectively a wrecking measure to try to ensure that any experiment will be a disaster and we will therefore revert to the status quo.

Finally, there is no disagreement on the Committee about the fact that the House ought to be the pinnacle of our democracy and worthy of public respect, but those of us who want change believe that Parliament has to evolve if it is to retain that respect. With one notable exception in the 17th century, the tradition of Parliament has been to choose evolution, not revolution. These are evolutionary proposals and I strongly hope that the House will seize the opportunity to move forward and evolve. Otherwise, it will remain pickled in aspic and become ever more distant from the public whom it purports to represent.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. No speech so far has been shorter than 16 minutes. It would be helpful if we could have shorter speeches.

7.11 pm

Mr. Nicholas Winterton (Macclesfield): I am pleased to follow the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey). It is important in such a debate that every case be put. Although I fundamentally disagreed with every word that the hon. Lady uttered, it is important that her remarks should be on the record.

I am in my 28th year in the House and it remains today as big an honour to represent my constituency at Westminster as it was when I was first elected at a by-election in 1971. I had little expectation of preferment then and I have little expectation of preferment today. I hope that hon. Members on both sides of the House would admit that I am a House of Commons man. I have a view of my own and whatever side of the House I have been sitting on, I have never hesitated to put that view.

I say to the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West that I believe in this House. As the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon), who is highly regarded not only in his constituency but in the House and throughout the country, has said, our duty lies primarily here in the House to hold to account the Government of the day and to scrutinise as best we can the legislation that they propose. I believe also in my constituency duties and I work very hard in my constituency. That is why I have been returned, but my constituents expect me to represent them at Westminster, to act in their best interests and to try to hold to account the Government of the day—even my own, and I found that difficult enough.

I am sorry that the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) has left his place. I hope that the Leader of the House will accept that I believe that the Modernisation Committee can work best if there is common ground between all its members, whatever their party allegiance. I therefore regret the aggressive and rather unfair presentation that the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush made of the way in which Conservative members of the Committee behaved over the report and the tabling of the amendment.

I entirely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery), who gave an accurate explanation of our action, which we took to ensure that our view could be voted on. If we had not tabled the amendment, the House would not have voted on our option that on Thursdays the House should sit at 11.30 am, Standing Committees should not meet before 10.30 am, and questions should be taken at 2.30 pm followed by business questions, private notice questions and ministerial statements. It is vital that the House vote on that proposal.

Mrs. Beckett: I am reluctant to take up any of the hon. Gentleman's time. He is right to say that we tried to proceed on common ground. Although my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) is not here to speak for himself, I understand the

[Mrs. Beckett]

reasons for his concern. I remind the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) and other Conservative members of the Committee that if we had not sought to achieve as much common ground as possible, Labour members of the Committee could have insisted that the option of having questions at 2.30 pm was not included in the report. It was included only in deference to those—the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Member for East Devon were among them—who expressed the view that it ought to be put before the House to find out whether hon. Members wanted to reject the option proposed by the Government.

Mr. Winterton: If a majority of members of the Committee had insisted that our option not be included in the report, there would not have been a so-called unanimous report; there would have been a minority report. Perhaps the right hon. Lady is saying that in future we should not seek to work through consensus and that there could be a series of minority reports. I would regret that, and I think that she would also regret it. The attitude and tone of the hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush led me to believe sincerely that that may be the only course of action that the Opposition can take in trying to ensure that the House's view, as against that of the Government, is properly registered.

I want briefly to address the issue of Standing Committees sitting in September. During the debates in Committee, I felt that that would be an undesirable development. Although Select Committees can meet in September, that decision is made by all members of the Committee. If Standing Committees met in September, that would be a Government-driven decision which would cause difficulty for many members of Committees. As the Leader of the House knows, September is the favoured month for delegations to the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to visit countries throughout the world.

Speaking as a senior member of the Chairmen's Panel, I believe that the proposal would cause problems also for Committee Chairmen who voluntarily seek to manage the business of the House, which is a heavy responsibility that takes up a great deal of time. I hope that some of the newer Members will, when they vote, appreciate the problems that could arise from that proposal.

Part II of our report, which deals with the second, parallel Chamber or Main Committee, seeks to get a reaction from hon. Members and members of the public who are interested in the way in which the House operates.

Like the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne, I have been the Chairman of a Select Committee. In fact, I was the subject of a rather interesting rule of which the House had apparently no knowledge until it was applied, and I was not reappointed to that Select Committee in 1992. However, that is water under the bridge, and I lived to fight another day. As one door closes, another one opens. *[Interruption.]* The door might have been slammed in my face, but others opened, not least in that I now have the opportunity to chair the Select Committee on Procedure.

The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne is right to say that not enough Select Committee reports are debated on the Floor of the House. Many of those reports are very well researched, as the Committees take evidence from a wide range of experts. The House would benefit from the wider debate that could take place were those reports given greater exposure, as the right hon. Gentleman suggested. It is my view—a view shared by the right hon. Gentleman—that the only way Back Benchers from all parties can hold the Government of the day to account is through the work of the Select Committees. More time must be found to debate Select Committee reports, but like my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon, I agree that we should not take the focus away from this Chamber.

If we can learn anything from the parliamentary procedures and experience of Australia, I am sure that we will want to do so. If there is clear evidence that a parallel Chamber is an advantage, I assure the Leader of the House that I shall not stand in its way. In fact, I might well support it, but these are early days in that debate, and we have much evidence still to hear.

The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne now chairs the Liaison Committee with great distinction. What he said should be read and digested by all hon. Members, not just the newer ones—although the 1997 intake on the Government Benches might like to consider it. He outlined the true role and function of a Member of Parliament, and I am grateful to him for the tone and content of his speech.

I hope that it will in no way embarrass Madam Speaker if I quote Peter Riddell, the political columnist of *The Times*, who wrote in the section entitled "Week in Westminster" in *The House Magazine*:

> "Madam Speaker delivered a formidable, persuasive and multi-salvo broadside against the proposals for changing the hours for Thursday sittings".

As the Leader of the House said, I fully accept that Madam Speaker, in our valuable meeting with her, went on to say that if the House introduced changes, she and the staff of the House would do their very best to ensure that they were implemented successfully. However, I shall also quote from Madam Speaker's letter to the Committee in which she said:

> "It might well be sensible for the Committee to take evidence from House Departments in order to assess the implications properly"

With one or two exceptions, the Committee took no oral evidence. I believe that that was a very grave error of judgment.

Mr. Butterfill: Was there any assessment of the likely cost of the changes? Before the House votes on the proposals, it is important that we know what they will cost the public.

Mr. Winterton: My hon. Friend has only to read the report to see that no facts are given about the cost of the changes, and the Leader of the House made none public in her opening speech.

I hope that I shall not embarrass the Chairman of Ways and Means if I say that, at a very full meeting on this subject last week, Panel members of all parties were outspoken in their support for the arguments deployed by him in his letter of 21 July to the then Leader of the House. They made it perfectly clear that they were disappointed that the views expressed on behalf of the Chairmen's Panel had carried so little weight with the Government and the Committee.

The letter from the Chairman of Ways and Means stated that it was

"the Panel's belief that there will be substantial inconvenience to members, Chairmen and staff if the House agrees to the Government's proposal that standing Committees should meet at 9am . . . an earlier cut-off time for the tabling of amendments, if implemented, will be a distinct disadvantage to committee members who often rely on the availability of *Hansard* covering the previous sitting."

I should point out to hon. Members who have not sat on many, or any, Standing Committees that when tabling amendments it is important to have an accurate report of what has occurred in earlier sittings. If we are to bring forward the cut-off time for the tabling of amendments, with everything that goes with it, the House will not only be inconvenienced but will not be able to hold the Government of the day to account in the way it should.

The Chairmen's Panel went on to say:

"There appear to be obvious impracticalities about arranging the selection of amendments late at night or in the early morning . . . It is unrealistic to suppose that the hands of business managers"—

the Leader of the House is very much a business manager—

"could be tied to the extent that sittings of standing committees after 7pm would be prohibited by standing orders, but the Panel would be exceedingly unhappy if the perceived benefits of bringing forward the whole parliamentary day on Thursdays were not to be extended to the members, Chairmen and staff of standing committees."

Standing Committee Chairmen might not only be caused considerable inconvenience, but would gain no benefit from the so-called improvements. They could not leave at 7 pm because the business managers would insist that the Committees continued to sit, as they can, after 7 pm. I want to make it perfectly clear that Standing Committee Chairmen receive no additional pay or responsibility allowance. They do their job out of love, affection and respect for the House. I have served on the Chairman's Panel for 12 to 13 years, and I greatly enjoy my work, which I believe is a valuable contribution to the work of the House.

As I said, we are also concerned about the proposal that Standing Committees should have the freedom to meet during recesses. I have dealt with that subject, but it is vital that the House should understand the problems that could occur if that proposal went ahead.

We are talking about the House's ability to hold the Government of the day to account. As I said, I am a House of Commons man. I have not adopted the position that I have in order to frustrate the Leader of the House or the Labour Government. I believe fervently in the integrity of this House and in the need for Members of Parliament to be able to do their job properly. I have a nasty feeling that these proposals may well be the first step towards the creation of a professional, career politician, working what the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South–West would describe as normal working hours—that is, 9 to 5. That is not the role of Members of Parliament.

Dr. Starkey: Will the hon. Gentleman confirm that I have never suggested in the Select Committee that this House should work from 9 to 5? Will he kindly withdraw any suggestion that I might have made such remarks?

Mr. Winterton: The hon. Lady should look at tomorrow's report of this debate. She has talked of the normal working day. Working from 9 to 5 is a normal working day. We do an exceptional job; it is not normal, but it is vital to this country's democracy. I plead with Labour Members to think very carefully about what they are doing. They will not always be in government; they may sit on the Opposition Benches in future. I was very concerned about the Jopling proposals. The right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) is absolutely right to say that the change of rules and procedures played entirely into the hands of the Labour party, which clearly knew that it would form the Government after the 1997 election. Let us not make the same mistake again.

7.31 pm

Mr. Martin Salter (Reading, West): I welcome the on-going work of the Modernisation Committee and its important and long overdue contribution to the national debate about how we modernise our political system, enabling it to serve us better in the next millennium. I give notice that I do not intend to take interventions, to speak for more than six minutes or to be as self-indulgent as some other hon. Members.

This is my third opportunity to call for a radical overhaul of procedures in this place. I speak now with a little more wisdom and experience than I could in my maiden speech or in the excellent debate in November on the Modernisation Committee's previous report, which gave us pre-legislative scrutiny, which we are piloting, and a far clearer, better and more understandable Order Paper.

In listening with care to hon. Members with considerably more experience than me, I am reminded of the advice that a very senior Labour Back Bencher gave me when I first arrived in this place. It went something like this: "When I came here, Martin, I was just like you—breathing fire and brimstone, wanting to turn the whole place upside down. Funnily enough, as the years went by and I found myself in a position to influence change, I somehow did not want to do so." I assure all hon. Members and you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that I remain a passionate advocate of change.

I support the recommendations in the excellent report and, of course, those in the motion, especially the ones to sit earlier on Thursday and to provide more flexibility for Standing Committee sittings. We have heard much about how much more the Committee could do and how it is important to provide more time on the Floor of the House to debate Select Committee reports. As a member of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, whose chairman, the right hon. Member for Cities of London and Westminster (Mr. Brooke)—for whom I have great respect—I see in his place, I heartily endorse that.

We can go further still. We spend much time looking at early-day motions, yet they are no more than political graffiti. If the Main Committee's proposals came into force, would not it be possible for time to be made available to debate on the Floor of the House an early-day motion on a matter of some import to which, for the sake of argument—I am open to suggestions—50 per cent. of hon. Members lent their names? The Modernisation Committee is absolutely right to state that this process is evolutionary, that we must consider new suggestions and ideas and that, in many ways, we must return to the fact that this House once was, as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) said, a truly flexible and changeable institution.

[Mr. Martin Salter]

It is a matter of some regret that this debate falls on the one day of a family event—the Westminster kids club Christmas party—in the Houses of Parliament. Many of the recommendations are about family life and admitting that, perhaps, we should challenge the machismo culture of our politics in this place. I learned my politics on building sites, representing building and transport workers. I can deal in machismo politics, but that does not make it right. There is nothing to commend a Minister having to stand at the Dispatch Box throughout the night, following a full day's work in his or her Department, and somehow answering questions the next day.

I am reminded of something that occurred to me a while ago. If the IRA or some other terrorist group put a drug in the House of Commons water supply which made us tired and Ministers more irritable and less effective, it would be an act of treason which, until recently, carried the death penalty. Yet somehow in our procedures, we have enshrined sleep deprivation to the point of a constitutional requirement. That is nonsense. No business, private enterprise or rapacious capitalist, so admired by Conservative Members, would run his or her operation in such a way.

It is okay to have family life; it is all right for a Member of Parliament to be married or to live with someone and to stay married or living with someone. It is all right for a Member of Parliament to have children and know their names—hon. Members may take that any way that they like—and occasionally spend some time with them during school holidays. My commiserations go to colleagues from Scotland—the fact that the Whip on the Front Bench is Scottish has nothing to do with it—who are severely disadvantaged by the Scottish school calendar.

None of us takes great pleasure in the vultures of the press who circle over Members' private lives, although it is almost inevitable that the hothouse atmosphere in this place, the pressure of hours of working, the way in which we conduct our business and the confrontational nature of our politics will destroy family life.

Opposition to the very modest proposals among Opposition Members has something to do with non-family outside interests too. At one time, one could just about make a case for a Member of Parliament having business interests and other forms of income, but that is certainly not so now. My comments and criticism apply to hon. Members on both sides of the House. We are well rewarded; more than twice the average white-collar wage comes our way—plus allowances.

The work of a Member of Parliament has changed. Statistics show that we deal with 50 times more letters and contacts than we did in the 1950s. If there is one thing that I have learnt in my short time in this place, it is that representing 70,000 people is a full-time job. If we have outside business interests, we cannot serve effectively our party in this place or in our constituency, our constituents, and our bank managers—our three masters.

Opposition to changing the hours of work has far more to do with the very comfortable commercial interests to which some hon. Members have become accustomed. It is about time we came clean, stopped the crocodile tears and the hypocrisy, agreed the recommendations and took this place into the 21st century.

7.39 pm

Mr. John Butterfill (Bournemouth, West): I am sorry that, to some extent, a party issue has developed in this debate. This should not be a party matter. We need to—and should—debate the subject free of party prejudice. I speak as a member of the Chairmen's Panel, which has tried to consider the measures objectively. Through you, Mr. Deputy Speaker, we have submitted our views, which are shared by members of the Panel irrespective of party affiliation. Indeed, the amendment, about which hon. Members have complained, has been signed by the hon. Member for Crewe and Nantwich (Mrs. Dunwoody). That shows that it is not just a party matter, nor should it ever be.

Much in the report is interesting. Some people think that members of the Chairmen's Panel are reactionary, that they are all old and smelly like me and that we will resist all proposals for change. That is not true. For example, I think that the proposal for a Main Committee is extremely interesting. It could free up time for debate in this place. Having been a Back Bencher all the time that I have been in Parliament, I know how frustrating it can be for Back Benchers to sit in the Chamber all night—sometimes all through the night—and still not be called to speak. If we could have more time for genuine debate in the House on matters of great importance, that would be an advantage, so I am keen to explore and take further evidence on the subject of the Main Committee, which could be a workable proposition for us.

Much of what we are about is designed not to release Conservative Members to do private work, as the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter) suggested, but to reduce the time that we spend in this place and to give hon. Members more time in their constituencies. However, I share with the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) the view that our job is essentially in this place.

In the 15 and a half years that I have been here, I have gone to my constituency every Friday, most Saturdays and some Sundays—although I try to keep Sundays as a family day—and I think that that is adequate. If I spent much more time in my constituency, my constituents might become suspicious that I was trying to ingratiate myself with them to get re-elected, and that I considered that a higher priority than doing the job that I was sent to do in Parliament.

What I have done so far has not been entirely unsuccessful. I know that my seat is relatively safe, but the swing against me at the last general election was less than half the national average, so I must be doing something approximately right.

Many of the proposals will make the work of the House much more difficult. I shall focus particularly on the idea that we should start Standing Committees at 9 am. As someone who chairs several Standing Committees, I think that that would be extremely difficult, for various reasons. Hon. Members have mentioned the problems that it would create for the tabling of amendments and for the work of the Clerks, who would have to get in very early to deal with the procedures of the day.

Although we Chairmen readily accept the load that is put upon us, we would have to get in well before 9 o'clock to prepare for the work of the Committee that day. I always get in at least half an hour before any Committee that I am chairing. I come in from outside London

every day, so that would be an additional burden to me and would mean that I had to travel in the rush hour, although that is not the main problem.

The main problem is that, if Committees sat earlier, many of the other activities in which we engage in the House would become virtually impossible. For example, I serve on the Select Committee on Trade and Industry and on other Select Committees, notably the Unopposed Bills Committee. The Trade and Industry Committee, which used to sit only on Wednesdays, now usually sits on Tuesdays as well. On six of the eight Tuesdays in this parliamentary Session, the Trade and Industry Committee has sat on Tuesday morning.

It is already difficult for someone like me, who is on the Chairmen's Panel, to combine being a member of a Select Committee with my responsibilities on the Panel. If we go down the route proposed, it will become impossible.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): The hon. Gentleman is a distinguished Chairman of the Finance Bill Committee, on which I have the privilege to sit. Does he agree that the time up to 10.30 am on Thursday is crucial for preparation for that Committee? We rely heavily on outside experts, and their views often come to us that morning, immediately before the Committee sits.

Mr. Butterfill: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point. I intended to refer to it, as well as to some of the problems of major Bills.

Some hon. Members do not fully appreciate how much preparation is necessary for the Committees, on the part not just of the Chairmen and the Clerks, but of the Back Benchers who serve on them and the Front-Bench spokesmen, who need time to prepare. We are compressing the parliamentary week in effect into almost three days, which means greater pressure to sit late, especially on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

If we have sat late in the House the night before, it will be a severe problem to meet early on Thursday morning. With such pressure on us, it will become almost impossible for any hon. Member to serve both on the Chairmen's Panel and on a Select Committee. Regrettably, some hon. Members will have to decide between the two, which we would greatly prefer not to have to do.

It is suggested that we would always be able to get away early on Thursdays, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) pointed out, that is by no means the case. Those of us who serve regularly on Committees, particularly those who are Chairmen of Committees, know that the Committees frequently sit well after the House has risen.

I carried out an analysis of the sittings of the Finance Bill Committee, which I frequently chair and on which I have served for most of the years that I have been in the House. Last year, the Committee sat one evening until 12.1 am. That was an exceptional Finance Bill Committee, because the new Government compressed the Bill into a short period. This year was more typical. On successive Thursdays, the Finance Bill Committee sat until 10.30 pm, 10 pm, 10.40 pm and 10.52 pm. On Tuesdays, we sometimes sat later. One Tuesday, we sat until 2.1 am.

Given that that pattern is likely to continue, especially for major Bills, a large number of hon. Members will sit late on Thursdays and will not get any of the supposed benefits of the reforms. I urge hon. Members to think seriously about the burdens that they will place on the staff of the House, those who run the Refreshment Department, those who serve the House in various roles and the costs of the House.

If we do that, we may find that the proposal that Standing Committees should not sit until later and the amendment is worthy of serious consideration and should not be condemned out of hand as a party move. It is certainly not a party move for members of the Chairmen's Panel. We feel that we have a debt to repay after many years in the House, and we try to make this place work as successfully as we can.

7.48 pm

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): I shall take careful note of your request to keep our remarks brief, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I know that other hon. Members want to speak, so I shall speak for no more than three or four minutes.

The opportunity to speak in the debate is a form of catharsis for those of us who have sat on the Select Committee twice a week for the past six months to prepare the report. Some may feel that the report is a mouse rather than a lion—that comment was made in Committee by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler). Many Labour Members, and others, I hope, believe that the report is the start of other improvements in the House, rather than the beginning of the end, as some Opposition Members would have us believe.

The acrimonious tone of the debate this evening does not reflect the atmosphere in the Select Committee. In the main, we came up with consensus. Although there was always disagreement about when Question Time would be, I hope for unanimity on other parts of the report. Hon. Members should reflect that by trying to make the measure work, if and when it is passed.

The measure is part and parcel of the modernisation agenda, which is not about making this place less effective, but about making it more effective. We have two roles. First, many changes could be made to the legislative role to make Back Benchers more effective. The second role concerns how we scrutinise the activities of the Executive. If we are to get a Main Committee, the measure should go through. I pray that it does; if it does not, the Modernisation Committee will have to start again, because this is a stepping-stone process.

On that point, some of us would argue that the measure provides continuity rather than discrete change from Jopling. We were not Members of Parliament at the time, but Jopling saw the benefits of tidying up Thursdays, and the measure takes that to a natural conclusion.

There is a degree of bitterness and disagreement here, which was not the case in the Select Committee. I hope that we can wash some of that away and move on to the things that the House can do even better, if and when the measure is passed and we move on to the possibilities of a Main Committee and to the other issues that have been referred to, and on which I want to concentrate.

Statutory instruments are used increasingly to bring legislation into effect. That process should be opened up, and perhaps the Modernisation Committee would

[Mr. David Drew]

consider that. The way in which Select Committees report, or fail to report, has been mentioned many times. The devolution dividend may bring real benefits to the Procedure Committee, and members of it are indebted to the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), who is about to leave, for his chairmanship. The tabling of questions when the House is not sitting should also be considered.

All those things can follow, but if we do not pass the measure we will be back to the drawing board. I ask hon. Members to bear in mind the fact that many of us think that modernisation is needed. Conservative Members sit on the Modernisation Committee, although they may not want to call this modernisation. I hope that they will bear in mind the fact that there is overwhelming demand for change—not only from hon. Members, but from our constituents, who find some of our processes bizarre and impossible to explain. They think that the changes are to do not with being family friendly, but with the way in which democracy should be functioning.

I hope that we get the measure through and that we can sell it to people, rather than being told by the press that it is about taking extra holidays. It is about making this place more effective and making it work in the way that it should. I hope that there is less bitterness in the future.

7.53 pm

Mr. Roger Gale (North Thanet): A change to sitting hours

"needs to be considered in the light of its contribution to improving Members' ability to discharge their duties both to the House and to their constituents—scrutinising legislation, holding the executive to account and debating issues of national of local importance."

The author of those words tabled observations and objections to these measures under eight headings and in a personal comment. The author was Madam Speaker. Since she became Speaker of the House, she has made it her bounden duty to defend the interests of the Back Benchers.

I am deeply saddened that this has been turned into a party issue. It is not. Those of us who serve on the Chairmen's Panel—two of my colleagues have already spoken—voted unanimously to support the letter that the Chairman of Ways and Means sent to the Committee. Of all parties, we did so because we believed that these measures, if implemented as stated in the motion tabled by the Leader of the House, would damage the interests of Back Benchers and make it not impossible, but profoundly difficult, for the servants of this House, who serve us so well, to do their job.

Those of us who serve on the Committee regard our non-partisan position, and prize it, very highly indeed. I have served for six years as the chairman of an all-party group that was not, on occasions, uncontentious. It was my proud boast that party politics never entered into things, and that has to be true with members of the Chairmen's Panel. If we were seen to be in any way partisan, the Committees that we chair would rightly have no confidence in us.

I ask the House to accept that the points that I shall make are simple and totally non-party political. This is a political issue. The politics are about the right of Back Benchers on both sides of the House to hold the Executive to account. This is a battle, but it is between the Executive and Back Benchers—not between Labour, Conservative or Liberal. Nor should it be.

If the measure goes ahead, it will be immeasurably more difficult for Back Benchers to table amendments in Committee. If we are told that we have to sit at 9 o'clock, we will. If I have to come in at 7.30 am, that will make very little difference. I do not often see the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter), who accused Conservative Members of wanting to do other jobs, when I collect my mail at 7.30 in the morning. If I have to come in then to study amendments, and to read the legislation to make sure that my bit of the job is done well, I will do it, but for me to do that, the Clerks will have to come in much earlier.

With great respect, the hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) missed this point completely. The cut-off point which the Committee has recommended will be so much earlier that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton) said, the papers and *Hansard* from previous sittings that are needed to table sensible, intelligent amendments will simply not be available.

It is significant that two of the three Privy Councillors who have spoken—the right hon. Members for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) and for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon)—expressed sympathy with those views. It is the duty of the House to hold the Executive to account.

Mr. Derek Foster: I appreciate the House's indulgence. I should have put my name down to speak, but I did not expect to be able to attend the debate.

I want to announce to my colleagues that I shall vote for the Conservative amendment, because I have listened to the arguments and they are very persuasive.

Mr. Ivor Caplin (Hove): Rubbish.

Mr. Foster: They are not persuasive to my hon. Friend, but they are to me. Forgive me, but I have been a Member of the House for rather longer than he has. I was Opposition Chief Whip for 10 years, fighting the Conservatives night after night. I was fighting the Liberal Democrats, too, and I will do so again. In my considered view, the Conservatives are right and my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House is wrong. I have told her so, and she is angry with me, but I have said, "Tough." This is a free vote—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman is experienced enough to know that he is now making a speech rather than an intervention.

Mr. Gale: The right hon. Gentleman was making the point better, and with more force and more experience, than I can. He is known on both sides of the House to be a gentleman of enormous principle, and I believe that he is right.

One issue has not been covered thoroughly, and I want to touch on it. When I was first elected to the House 15 years ago, on four mornings a week members of the public could visit the mother of Parliaments, and see it in all its glory and all its workings. On three of those mornings, they could be taken around the House by their Member of Parliament. I say "three" because many

Members of Parliament have a long distance to travel on Monday, or they do constituency business on Monday morning. Therefore, Monday tended not to be the favoured day, and it still is not.

As a result of the move of Prime Minister's Question Time, without any consultation with Madam Speaker, two things have happened. First, there is now only one day when our constituents can attend Prime Minister's Question Time, whereas there used to be two. Therefore, half as many people see twice as much, and that is undesirable. Secondly, constituents who have come a long way cannot now do as they used to and go around the House in the morning, have a picnic lunch and attend Prime Minister's Question Time in the afternoon. That has been denied them.

This, we are told, is a people's Parliament. If it is, why are we about to be asked to vote to deny our constituents yet another morning when they could visit the House? In effect, groups of school children—tomorrow's Members of Parliament—will be confined to one morning of the week—Tuesdays.

For those reasons, and because we have a duty to defend the rights of Back Benchers, I shall be voting for the Opposition's amendment. But it will be for those reasons, not for party political reasons.

8.1 pm

Charlotte Atkins (Staffordshire, Moorlands): Today we have a chance to grasp the nettle of parliamentary reform, building on the success of the Jopling changes. Before us today is a limited proposal to allow business to end at around 7.30 pm on Thursday, and only on an experimental basis. I hope that the Modernisation Committee will bring forward more radical proposals in the near future.

With so many new Members elected less than two years ago, we have the opportunity to think the unthinkable; to consider how best to deliver the legislative process, and how best to use hon. Members' time in the Chamber, in Committee and in our constituencies.

When my father came to the House more than 30 years ago, the demands and pressures of the constituency were far less great, and the needs of a Member's family were very much on the back burner. It has obviously become fashionable for some Opposition Members to sneer at family-friendly practices.

During my father's first term in Parliament in a marginal seat, I was still at school and I hardly saw him, except occasionally first thing in the morning and, to my embarrassment, if I was coming in at night rather later than I should have done. Now, as the mother of a 12-year-old daughter, I hope that things have moved on a little.

If, as Members of Parliament, we want to be well-rounded individuals—I do not mean the sort of roundness that comes at Christmas—we must be in touch with real people's lives. For them, family life is important, and I believe that family life should be important for Members of Parliament too.

Therefore, I applaud attempts to synchronise parliamentary recesses and adjournments with school holidays, despite the problem of Scottish holidays. How can we attract sensible, intelligent people to stand for Parliament if one of the requirements of the job is to give up any hope of normal family life.

Mr. John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings): That could be said of nurses, doctors, paramedics, policeman and people who serve in the armed forces. Are we to assume that none of them have good family lives or care about their families? They are exceptional jobs, like this one, and exceptional jobs require exceptional commitment. It is as simple as that.

Charlotte Atkins: But we have a chance to change all that. We have a window of opportunity with new Members who are not hidebound by tradition. I sometimes think that this is rather like a scene in "Yes, Minister", where Humphrey might say, "Well, we can keep all those Members really tired and away from their constituencies and families." Then the Minister says, "But can we get away with it?" To which Humphrey replies, "Yes, we can. All we have to do is call it tradition." We can get away from such hidebound traditions by looking at the practicalities of the issue.

We have heard from a number of people that that is impossible, but where there is a will, there is a way. We can build in sufficient flexibility for, shock horror, Members of Parliament to be able to attend parents' evenings, the school nativity play in which their child might be starring, and even to plan school holidays without feeling that they are particularly privileged.

As Members of Parliament, we delight in lecturing businesses, small and large, about modernisation, efficiency and family-friendly practices. How can they take us seriously if we do not live up to the demands that we make of them?

Does it make any sense to ask Members to vote at 10 o'clock on a Thursday night with the result that those who want a full day in their constituencies have to drive through the night? No doubt that is what my near neighbours from Congleton and Macclesfield will have to do, because our last train is at about 8 pm. How many hon. Members have nearly fallen asleep at the wheel?

Sir Patrick Cormack: Does the hon. Lady not accept that some hon. Members on both sides of the House who have been in this place for quite a long time have had reasonably successful family lives, have brought up their children and known them, and have come into the office every morning, as I still do, between 7.30 and 8 am, and stayed there most of the day? Can she not accept that there are experiences other than those that she has had over a brief period?

Charlotte Atkins: Yes, I can accept that, but that is not the norm. People outside cannot understand why we persist in these practices. A month ago, I went to Castle primary school in Mow Cop in my constituency where I spoke to a number of 10 and 11-year-olds about parliamentary life. They were bewildered when I said that the start of the official parliamentary day was 2.30 pm. That view is not confined to 10 and 11-year-olds. Their parents are also bewildered by the sort of practices and confrontational behaviour that we experience in the Chamber. That is reinforced if they are or their parents come to this place. They see that we value their visit so

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much that we create no facilities for visitors, ensure that they cannot come during the recesses and can only visit at certain times. We should ensure that they have proper facilities, not crowded corridors, in which to meet their Members of Parliament and have a proper hearing.

I am not suggesting, as was suggested, quite wrongly, of my hon. Friend the Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey), that we should have a 9 to 5 parliamentary day. That would be ludicrous. That is the sort of thing that has been rehearsed in the media. Clearly, that is not being suggested. We need to strike a balance between the needs of Members from different parts of the country. However, a 7.30 finish on a Thursday would make sense for those who want to return to their constituencies.

I was pleased to hear an Opposition Member say how he always used to return to his constituency for Friday and Saturday. *[Interruption.]* In my father's day, 30 years ago, it was the exception for Members to live in their constituencies and to give the sort of attention to constituency business that that hon. Member so honourably did.

Let us vote for this moderate experiment. What are we scared of? I hope that it will create a firm foundation for future reform. *[Interruption.]* We must show that we are willing to consider creating the modern Parliament that we need to achieve the modern Britain that we aspire to create.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. Members should not have private conversations during the debate. The hon. Lady is addressing the House and she is entitled to the courtesy of a hearing. *[Interruption.]* That is a matter of opinion. It is not appalling to me, and I want to hear what she has to say.

Charlotte Atkins: Thank you, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I have concluded my remarks.

8.9 pm

Mr. Richard Allan (Sheffield, Hallam): This has been a fascinating debate in revealing so many contrasting views on the wonderful world of Westminster. I should start by saying that I do not yet feel myself to be a Westminster man but a Sheffield man who has the good fortune to represent my constituents here. On Fridays, I do not visit my constituency, I go home. On Mondays, I come away again from my home. It is very much that way round rather than in any other direction.

I hope that this place does not run like the boarding school that it often seems to be, in that prefects who have been here the longest get the most say over what happens. I should prefer it to be run rather like a business or modern organisation in which new people with fresh perspectives and new ideas are welcome and often able to set the agenda, because they have come in from outside with a different view. I hope that we are a representative democracy, representing all views, spectrums and genders, rather than the gerontocracy that we may sometimes appear to be.

I should class myself as a radical moderniser. Like the hon. Member for Reading, West (Mr. Salter), I am waiting for that outlook to change, with the dramatic realisation that things are done the best way that they possibly can be and should not change at all ever again. I await that moment.

I am fully aware that I have only 18 months' experience in the House. However, having been through our consideration of the European Parliamentary Elections Bill and its attendant shenanigans, I feel that I may have had an accelerated learning process in studying the House's more arcane procedures, which I hope—if other reforms are passed—will never have to be used again. Nevertheless, with my 18 months, I have not yet swung away from that modernising view. Currently, I see no prospect that I shall do so.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Mr. Tyler) said in his speech that the Committee's proposals are a small step, and that, in deciding whether to choose option one or option two, we are angels dancing on the head of a pin. We are considering a small part of a bigger agenda, which is discussed comprehensively in the report. I hope that the House will soon be considering some of the bigger changes.

The hon. Member for Milton Keynes, South-West (Dr. Starkey) was right to say the proposals are about evolution. The evolution model is a very good one to use in considering modernisation. Students of Darwin will know that evolution is all about an organism's response to a changing environment. Our environment is changing significantly in two key aspects: first, the legislative process; and, secondly, the role of hon. Members.

Hon. Members have to be more responsive on the legislative process. New things are coming along—we must respond to European directives, international conventions and technology changes. I recently spent time with Centrica, which is the British Gas successor, and was told about its efforts to enter the electricity market. It desperately needs legislation on reforming that market. Centrica knows that, because of how the House works, there is no prospect for two or perhaps three years of getting that legislation. I know of other businesses that are in a similar situation, in which a swifter response by Parliament is required to meet their requirements. I do not believe that our current structures allow us to make all the necessary responses.

I am firmly of the view—speaking on the legislative process as an Opposition Member—that quality should be a more significant factor than quantity in deciding the House's business. We need better time management—which both the current report and previous reports dealt with—rather than only having more time. I do not believe that having more time in which we do not do anything useful will gain us much, although other heads in the House say that the time weapon is an important one. As I observed Parliament before being elected as an hon. Member, it did not seem to me that, particularly the Government of Baroness Thatcher, were significantly diverted from their path because the Opposition were able to sit up all night complaining about the Government's actions, yet losing every Division and failing to change anything.

The second key category of change is the role of hon. Members—which has moved on. I very much feel that I am a public servant, answerable to the public and paid for by the public. I believe that the public have a right to their view on what my job should be. To me, their view is that they expect me to be with them at certain times.

Earlier today, for example, I spent time with some young people from Sheffield—young Sheffielders—who wanted to talk to me about the political process. They are not interested in coming into the Chamber and listening to our debates, and no wave of a magic wand will suddenly make them interested in them. I cannot turn around and say, "Sonny Jim, you ought to come and listen to our debates." That is not what they want. They want me to be with them, talking about politics in their terms. I want to have the time to do that.

I honestly believe that I will do as much for the public process by being outside the House debating and talking with my constituents in their schools, youth clubs and communities as often I will do in this place. Having that time is not only about me promoting myself in my constituency but about the public good. I believe that such time is significant.

I believe also that my experience outside the House with people in my constituency informs my contributions in the House and gives me a much better balance, stopping me from getting out of touch and developing "Westminsteritis" in which I see everything from the Westminster perspective. Such experience benefits particularly hon. Members from more distant constituencies, where people's views of life, of London and of events here are very different from the reality.

I deal with my constituency work in Sheffield. My office there is close to my constituents. I do not have the option in the morning of going through my constituency mail here; it is dealt with in the constituency. I believe that dealing with it there gives a better service. Many other new hon. Members have organised themselves similarly. It is perfectly reasonable, especially if one is operating at some distance, to have Sheffielders in a Sheffield office that has open access to deal with constituency work. I work with them on Mondays and Fridays, but, during the week, they deal with the work in Sheffield.

We have an alternative to evolution: extinction. We can moan all we like about how the media ignore us—whereas in a golden age they avidly took down every word that we said—but I do not believe that that moaning will improve matters. The reality is that most citizens would rather watch politics in the form of a media stunt somewhere rather than as a dry statement in the House. In a Stalinist state, one can control the media and insist that all citizens sit in front of the television and watch our proceedings from beginning to end. Fortunately, in our liberal society, we do not have that option.

It is very important that we evolve to cope with events outside the House. We may not like those developments, but they are the reality and the environment in which we live. The issue is very much one of evolving to work and cope with that environment, or of becoming extinct—ever less relevant, so that we are simply talking to ourselves about how we feel spurned, how no one is interested in us any more and what a shame it is that we cannot return to the golden age of 10, 20 or 30 years ago, depending on one's perspective.

On longer-term proposals, I should prefer the House to consider the parliamentary calendar from scratch. I was very interested in the notion of blocks of working at Westminster and blocks of working in constituencies. I find that option very attractive for myself, not only for my family life, which is a consideration for all hon. Members, but because it would enable me to give my constituents—the ones whom I was talking about, such as young people and various groups of workers—a firm time commitment and to spend a considerable period of my working life with the people who elected me to this place and pay my wages.

I should like the block system to be introduced. However, I think that we have also to consider matters such as the summer recess, to consider the whole system from scratch. The report rejected the block system, largely because it left in place the summer recess. I should be perfectly happy to have a couple of weeks holiday in August and then to work the rest of August and September, as other workers do. There is nothing wrong with that. The long recess should not be set in stone or obstruct more significant reform.

I like also the idea of having different weeks for plenary sittings, for Committee sittings and for constituency work, as that would reflect the work that we really do. As for the summer recess, as far as I am aware, the Thames no longer fouls up so badly that we are required to leave this place. London is no longer uninhabitable in the summer, when we have to go to our country homes—from here to Sheffield—for some decent air. We could also make better use of that wonderful Terrace if we were here in the months when it is most usable, and no longer regret the fact that it has been left abandoned as we all head off. Being here in the summer would therefore have considerable advantages, and we should put the option on the table rather than exclude summer months entirely.

The key thing for hon. Members such as myself, with my working practices, is to get right the balance between constituency and Westminster. One type of work is not to be excluded by the other; it is all about balance. I hope that in our proceedings, both today and in future, we shall, as a representative Chamber, be able to reach views which—although some hon. Members will disagree with them—allow us to move forward and perhaps to create a House that is genuinely fit for the 21st century—which is the phrase that is always used. We should certainly create a House that is able better to deal with business and to respond to the people who elect us, pay our wages and perhaps remove us from here.

8.19 pm

Mr. Derek Wyatt (Sittingbourne and Sheppey): I welcome the opportunity to discuss modernisation of the House and fully support the changes sought by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. However, I am glad that the Committee's proposals are only initial ones. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) has left the Chamber. He asked earlier about receiving Select Committee minutes overnight. Perhaps he does not know that new technology permits immediate conversation of voice-to-type. Obtaining minutes is therefore not an issue, as technology will produce the minutes. We also do not need stenographers as technology is changing so rapidly that it can service democracy much quicker.

I have a small favour to ask of my right hon. Friend. In future reports on modernisation, will she provide financial models so that we can see the likely cost to the House of proposed changes?

Reform of the House should start with an examination of the nature of the Executive—the role of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet. Those roles are undergoing

[Mr. Derek Wyatt]

changes as we move to elected assemblies in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as well as in the English regions over the next 10 years, together with the possibility of an elected upper House.

The Prime Minister is frequently referred to as the chief executive of UK plc. As a new Member, perhaps I could present a different perspective. No chief executive of a FTSE 100 company has 22 directors of the board, as we have in the Cabinet. We have more Cabinet members today than when we ran the empire 100 years ago. No chief executive of a FTSE 100 company, having asked his senior management to work a 14-hour day, then rewards them by giving them more work in red boxes that they have to read by the morning. No chief executive of a FTSE 100 company makes his middle managers—us—work at least 12 hours a day and frequently 15, 16 or more for less than £65,000 a year. At 10 o'clock, 11.30 or even 1.30 in the morning in the Lobbies, there can be upwards of £27 million worth of senior management voting. They vote on issues on which many of them have failed to speak—or even attend the debate.

Mr. Graham Brady (Altrincham and Sale, West): The hon. Gentleman's analogy is interesting. Inadvertently or not, he has made it clear that he regards Members of Parliament as analogous to middle managers. He appears to be missing the point that we are here to hold the Executive to account, not to assist it in its management functions. That is true of hon. Members on both sides.

Mr. Wyatt: That is our role in a modern democracy, but how best do we do it? We are the middle managers between our constituency and the Executive. [HON. MEMBERS: "No!"] Opposition Members can disagree.

There will be some hon. Members who have prepared speeches for tonight's debate but who will not be called to speak. It is a shame that those speeches cannot be published in *Hansard*. It seems absurd to go on with such a system.

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: I speak from the heart.

Mr. Wyatt: So do I.

The House of Lords divides the time available by the number of Members wishing to speak. Why do we not follow suit?

No chief executive would arrange such strange working hours and then allow most of his employees a 10-week break in the summer. It is not clear to me why the House of Commons is different from the rest of the country. Most people seem to manage with two weeks' holiday in the summer.

We have a working day that no union member and no member of the CBI would adhere to. Why? We need root-and-branch reform of the House of Commons if we are to modernise the country. We should be leading, not following. In everything that we have done to modernise the House, we have been reactive rather than proactive. The tail is wagging the institution. That cannot be right.

I look forward to the day when the House sits from 9.30 in the morning until 8 o'clock in the evening from Monday to Thursday. I should like to see financial models of the cost of such a move.

The current system actively discourages me from having any sort of family life. Is that right in a modern Parliament? Are we proud of it? I am not. It is a relic of the past. We send the wrong signals to the population. We want the best people here. To ensure that, we must give them the best facilities and the best systems. We do not have that.

Funnily enough, I have no contract of employment. I find that rather bizarre. It is true that I am Whipped to my delight and am here to vote and to be on-message—whatever that means. However, my constituents—the reason that I am here—do not have the foggiest idea what their expectations of me should be. They do not know whether I should live in the constituency. They do not know whether I should be holding weekly, fortnightly or monthly surgeries—or no surgeries. They do not know whether I should have a local office or whether I should be spending hours visiting schools, businesses and voluntary services. It is time that the House considered whether there should be a memorandum of understanding spelling out our responsibilities.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Beyond pathetic!

Mr. Wyatt: My speech is going down famously among the Conservatives.

This wonderful building—it is a wonderful building—is out of date for serving a modern democracy. We must convene a committee immediately to plan for a new Parliament that might kick-start us, albeit late, into the 21st century.

8.25 pm

Mrs. Ann Winterton (Congleton): The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) made an interesting speech. I shall read some of his comments with great interest in *Hansard* tomorrow.

I should like to pick the hon. Gentleman up on one or two issues. I was horrified that he described Members of Parliament as middle management. There seems to be a basic misunderstanding of our role. We all stand on a party ticket, but once we are elected we must represent the whole of our constituency, not just those who voted for us. We are certainly not middle management. We are here to represent our constituents to Ministers or to whatever organisation our constituents have problems with. I felt that I had to correct that.

We have had an interesting debate, with strong views expressed. I have intervened once or twice—perhaps rather fiercely at times, but that reflects the strength of my views. I have been here for only 15 years. Surprise, surprise—before I came here, I managed to have a normal family life, and have continued to do so since I was elected. Although some newer Members appear not to like the terms and conditions of this place and our role here, hundreds of people stand at every election, and would willingly swap with us.

I regret that the debate has been rather polarised. At times, it seems to have broken down on party lines. This is a matter for the House of Commons—for the Back Benchers. We are here to keep a check on the Government. Having been on the Government Benches for many years, I find it sobering to be in opposition. Many of the young bloods on the Government Benches

may find themselves in the same situation one day. Their role is to keep a check on their Government on behalf of their constituents.

Two of the most telling contributions this evening have come from two Privy Councillors on the Government Benches—the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster), a former Labour Chief Whip, and the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon). I hope that the new Members, who are every bit as much a part of this place as those of us who have been here a little longer, will consider carefully what those two experienced Members said, because it was most telling.

The other non-polarised view was that of the Chairmen's Panel. The members of the Chairmen's Panel give their time voluntarily, and take on onerous duties to play their part in the House. I hope that those who have listened to the debate will give weight to what they said.

8.29 pm

Sir George Young: With the leave of the House, I shall respond to some of the points that have been made. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Mr. Wyatt) opened up a new quarry, and many of us will spend Christmas reading his speech to see how we can best deploy some of his arguments.

In the light of the debate, I ask the Leader of the House whether we can have a separate debate on the Main Committee. Many speeches touched on the issue, but the debate has focused on Thursdays. When we return, perhaps on a Thursday, may we have a proper debate on the Main Committee, and encourage hon. Members to focus their minds on it?

I regret that we spent so much time on procedural issues. I genuinely believe that our approach has enabled the House to choose between two options, but I agree with the hon. Member for Stroud (Mr. Drew) that those who have listened to today's debate may take the view that the Modernisation Committee was conducted with the same tone. It was not. It was a fairly harmonious, conciliatory process. I very much hope that, after a seasonal break and with some good will, the Committee will resume in the new year in a spirit of co-operation.

The hon. Member for Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush (Mr. Soley) suggested—I think in some anger—that Opposition Members on the Committee should compile a minority report. I hope that, on reflection, he will feel able to withdraw that remark. He will not find four more conciliatory Conservative Members than the four who sit on the Modernisation Committee. We made a number of concessions, and we will approach our future agenda with good will.

The high point of the debate was the speech of the former Labour Chief Whip, the right hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster). He blew out of the water the Government's moral case that Labour Members had agreed to Jopling because it was the right course of action for the House. He made it quite clear that they agreed to it only when they thought that they would win the next election. They agreed to it out of base partisan motives, not the high-minded motives that we had been led to believe.

The main debate has been about whether Standing Committees should sit at 9 am or 10.30 am, and whether Question Time should be at 11.30 am or 2.30 pm. The balance of the debate has gone very much with the amendment. The right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Mr. Sheldon) made a bridge-building speech, and we heard many speeches from those who chair our Standing Committees, including my hon. Friend the Member for Macclesfield (Mr. Winterton), my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir P. Emery) and my hon. Friends the Members for Bournemouth, West (Mr. Butterfill) and for North Thanet (Mr. Gale). Those of us who sit on Standing Committees have a duty to listen to those who chair them. Their unanimous view was that the 10.30 am option is better than the 9 am one.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet took us through some of the procedural consequences, and the implications for staff, if we invited Standing Committees to meet at 9 am. If we are to change, I hope that we make the right change, and heed the advice of those who chair our Standing Committees.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet also mentioned the views of Madam Speaker. I understand all the sensitivities about that, but the real discourtesy to Madam Speaker would be not to refer to her views but to ignore them.

I conclude with a word of caution. I very much hope that the Government do not take the view that they can use their majority in the House to alter the way in which the House works. That would be a sad break with tradition, which, if abused, could undermine the ability of the legislature to hold the Executive to account. Against the background of the debate, and given that there is a free vote on both sides, I very much hope that those who have listened to the debate and take our procedures seriously will agree that the amendment is the right way forward, and that they will vote for it.

8.38 pm

Mrs. Beckett: First, let me respond to the right hon. Member for North-West Hampshire (Sir G. Young) by saying that, like him, I regret the tone of some of the debate, and hope that, in future, the Select Committee will return to its customary comradely tone. I shall certainly bear in mind what he said about the Main Committee. At first, it was not entirely plain to me whether he had proposed an early debate on the matter. Perhaps that is what he means, and we can certainly discuss that through the usual channels.

I regretted, and was perhaps a little surprised by, the tone of some of the debate, but I suppose that I should not have been. Despite what he said a moment ago, the right hon. Gentleman in his opening remarks made the ridiculous proposition that in some way in the past 18 months this Parliament has become less central to the life of the nation. That suggestion was comprehensively blown out of the water by the right hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Mr. Maclennan), who made the pertinent point that it was complete nonsense, and that the role and treatment of Parliament had been changing for many years.

One or two speeches suggested that there was something strange about the Government making proposals to a Committee and seeking their endorsement. The right hon. Gentleman picked up on that in his closing remarks. As you will remember, Mr. Deputy Speaker, that is neither strange nor unusual. The most recent example that I can call to mind was in the 1993–94 Session, when

[Mrs. Beckett]

the then Government sought changes in the Standing Orders for the consideration of deregulation orders that were put to the Procedure Committee; so there is nothing unusual about that.

Nor, indeed, do the Government have any intention of using their majority to dictate to the House. I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will confirm that our conduct in the Committee does not support that suggestion. Although it is not unusual for the Government to propose changes to Standing Orders and so on, it is unusual—and we were advised that it might not be possible—for the Government to put alternative motions to the House.

However, the Government did just that, giving effect to the considered and unanimous decision of the Select Committee at paragraph 73 of the report:

"If the House rejects the Government proposal, we recommend that for this experimental period the alternative scenario"—

the one in the right hon. Gentleman's amendment—

"be adopted."

The Government have gone further than would have been necessary had we chosen to use our majority, and decided to give the House the choice of the alternatives on a free vote.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Mr. Foster) commands great respect and affection in the House, and he continues to command mine despite my strong disagreement with what he said this evening. Not only did I disagree with my right hon. Friend this evening; I disagreed with him over the Jopling proposals, and did so forcefully. As he has put his views on record and referred to mine, I would say to the House openly and bluntly that I have had the advantage of serving in the House for a slightly longer period. I have also had the advantage of serving in the Government Whips Office, in a Government who had no majority.

On the basis of that experience and the rest, I can say that the notion that in some way time is the weapon of the Opposition is a myth. As I said to the then shadow Cabinet, very rarely does the House change what the Government do in that way. Instead, we kill a few hon. Members on both sides. That may be considered a suitable occupation for a modern House of Commons, but I have never thought it so.

Mr. Gerald Howarth (Aldershot): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Mrs. Beckett: No, I have only two minutes.

I remind the House that we are considering proposals for an experiment. The delay in introducing the Jopling proposals has been mentioned, but the principal reason for that delay was that the then Government initially wanted to make a permanent change in the Standing Orders. I hope and believe that my advice as shadow Leader of the House to the then Leader of the House had some influence—I suggested that it would be a mistake to make permanent a change of which the House did not have experience, and that it would be wise to proceed through evolution and experiment. That is precisely what the Government are recommending tonight.

The debate has made it clear that the real choice is between what I would describe as no change or proper change. I do support the mish-mash and half-baked experiment that is—in my view; and it is my view alone—almost bound, and perhaps even intended, to fail. The House has a choice between the status quo and a good proposal. I urge the House to support the motion, but not the amendment to it.

It being four hours after the commencement of proceedings, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *proceeded to put the Question already proposed from the Chair, pursuant to Order [15 December].*

Question agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House approves the First Report from the Select Committee on Modernisation of the House of Commons on the Parliamentary Calendar: Initial Proposals (HC60).

SITTINGS OF THE HOUSE (No. 1)

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, with effect from Monday 11th January until the end of the present session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

(1) the House shall meet on Thursdays at half-past eleven o'clock, and will first proceed with private business, motions for unopposed returns and questions;

(2) proceedings on business on Thursdays shall be interrupted at seven o'clock; and

(3) in their application to Thursday sittings of the House, reference to a specified time in the Standing Orders shall be interpreted as reference to a time three hours before the time so specified, save that reference to half-past ten o'clock shall be substituted for reference to twelve o'clock in Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration).—*[Mr. Mike Hall.]*

Amendment proposed to the Motion (Sittings of the House (No. 1)): in paragraph 1, leave out from 'will' to end and add

'proceed with public business, which may include a motion for the adjournment of the House;

(2) at two o'clock on Thursdays, the Speaker shall interrupt the business without question put and the sitting shall be suspended until half-past two o'clock; the House will then proceed with private business, motions for unopposed returns and questions, after which any business interrupted at two o'clock shall be resumed;

(3) proceedings on business on Thursdays shall be interrupted at seven o'clock; and

(4) in their application to Thursday sittings of the House, reference to a specified time in the Standing Orders shall be interpreted as reference to a time three hours before the time so specified, save that reference to a quarter to three o'clock in Standing Order No. 20 (Time for taking private business), to half-past three o'clock in Standing Order No. 21 (Time for taking questions) and to twelve o'clock in Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration) shall remain unaltered.'.—*[Sir George Young.]*

Question put, pursuant to Order [15 December], That the amendment be made:—

The House divided: Ayes 140, Noes 311.

Division No. 26] **[8.41 pm**

AYES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*	Barnes, Harry
Amess, David	Beggs, Roy
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael	Beith, Rt Hon A J
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James	Beresford, Sir Paul
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*	Blunt, Crispin

Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brand, Dr Peter
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chidgey, David
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cook, Frank *(Stockton N)*
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cotter, Brian
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Dunwoody, Mrs Gwyneth
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fallon, Michael
Fearn, Ronnie
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gerrard, Neil
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Golding, Mrs Llin
Gorrie, Donald
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie
Kirkwood, Archy
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Mitchell, Austin
Moore, Michael
Nicholls, Patrick
O'Hara, Eddie
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Ruffley, David
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Sheldon, Rt Hon Robert
Shepherd, Richard
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Sir Teddy
Trend, Michael
Tyler, Paul
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Ayes:
Mrs. Marion Roe and Mr. John Bercow.

NOES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Barron, Kevin
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Blunkett, Rt Hon David
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Cabom, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell-Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cryer, John *(Hornchurch)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Dafis, Cynog
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Fatchett, Derek
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverhton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*

Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
Madaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malliber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'ld Heeley)*
Milburn, Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(Brm Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Speller, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Thomas, Gareth R *(Harrow W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Noes:
Miss Melanie Johnson and
Dr. Phyllis Starkey.

Question accordingly negatived.

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I had always understood that the business of the House of Commons was traditionally a matter for a free vote. Outside the Aye Lobby, there were no Whips, either Liberal or Conservative, but outside the No Lobby there were at least four Government Whips, encouraging those with no independence of mind into the Lobby. Is not that an abuse of the House?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): I must tell the hon. Gentleman that the Whips can go where they please: the Chair has no control over them.

Main Question put—

The House divided: Ayes 325, Noes 120.

Division No. 27] **[8.56 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allan, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Ashton, Joe
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Borrow, David
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Campbell–Savours, Dale
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Clapham, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Clwyd, Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis–Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*

Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Ellman, Mrs Louise
Fatchett, Derek
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Flynn, Paul
Follett, Barbara
Foster, Rt Hon Derek
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith
Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hoyle, Lindsay
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Kilfoyle, Peter
King, Andy *(Rugby & Kenilworth)*
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Llwyd, Elfyn
Lock, David
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Malleber, Judy
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mudie, George
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Pleskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Prentice, Gordon *(Pendle)*
Prescott, Rt Hon John
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Radice, Giles
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Short, Rt Hon Clare
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Rt Hon Chris *(Islington S)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Speller, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Wareing, Robert N
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Miss Melanie Johnson and Dr. Phyllis Starkey.

NOES

Ainsworth, Peter *(E Surrey)*
Amess, David
Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Arbuthnot, Rt Hon James
Atkinson, Peter *(Hexham)*
Barnes, Harry
Beggs, Roy
Beresford, Sir Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Boswell, Tim
Bottomley, Rt Hon Mrs Virginia
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Brooke, Rt Hon Peter
Browning, Mrs Angela
Bruce, Ian *(S Dorset)*
Burnett, John
Burns, Simon
Butterfill, John
Chapman, Sir Sydney *(Chipping Barnet)*
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Clifton-Brown, Geoffrey
Collins, Tim
Colvin, Michael
Cormack, Sir Patrick
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davies, Quentin *(Grantham)*
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Evans, Nigel
Fallon, Michael
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Garnier, Edward
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Gillan, Mrs Cheryl
Golding, Mrs Llin
Greenway, John
Grieve, Dominic
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hamilton, Rt Hon Sir Archie
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Hogg, Rt Hon Douglas
Howard, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jackson, Robert *(Wantage)*
Jenkin, Bernard
Johnson Smith, Rt Hon Sir Geoffrey
King, Rt Hon Tom *(Bridgwater)*
Kirkbride, Miss Julie

Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lait, Mrs Jacqui
Lansley, Andrew
Letwin, Oliver
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Lloyd, Rt Hon Sir Peter *(Fareham)*
Loughton, Tim
Luff, Peter
Lyell, Rt Hon Sir Nicholas
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
MacKay, Rt Hon Andrew
Maclean, Rt Hon David
McLoughlin, Patrick
Madel, Sir David
Marshall, Jim *(Leicester S)*
Maude, Rt Hon Francis
May, Mrs Theresa
Mitchell, Austin
Nicholls, Patrick
Öpik, Lembit
Ottaway, Richard
Page, Richard
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robathan, Andrew
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Simpson, Keith *(Mid-Norfolk)*
Smyth, Rev Martin *(Belfast S)*
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Steen, Anthony
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Tapsell, Sir Peter
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Taylor, Matthew *(Truro)*
Trend, Michael
Tyrie, Andrew
Viggers, Peter
Waterson, Nigel
Whitney, Sir Raymond
Whittingdale, John
Widdecombe, Rt Hon Miss Ann
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*
Woodward, Shaun
Yeo, Tim
Young, Rt Hon Sir George

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Marion Roe and
Mr. John Bercow.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That, with effect from Monday 11th January until the end of the present session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

(1) the House shall meet on Thursdays at half-past eleven o'clock, and will first proceed with private business, motions for unopposed returns and questions;

(2) proceedings on business on Thursdays shall be interrupted at seven o'clock; and

(3) in their application to Thursday sittings of the House, reference to a specified time in the Standing Orders shall be interpreted as reference to a time three hours before the time so specified, save that reference to half-past ten o'clock shall be substituted for reference to twelve o'clock in Standing Order No. 24 (Adjournment on a specific and important matter that should have urgent consideration).

MEETINGS OF STANDING COMMITTEES (No. 1)

Motion made, and Question put,

That, with effect from Monday 11th January until the end of the present session of Parliament, the Standing Orders and practice of the House shall have effect subject to the modifications set out below:

Meetings of standing committees:

Standing committees shall have leave to sit at any hour and notwithstanding any adjournment of the House, subject to the following provisions:

(a) on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays when the House is sitting, no standing committee sitting at Westminster shall sit between the hours of one o'clock and half-past three o'clock, except as provided in paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 88 (Meeting of standing committees); and

(b) on Thursdays when the House is sitting, no standing committee sitting at Westminster shall sit between the hours of half-past eleven o'clock and half-past twelve o'clock, except as provided in paragraph (2) of Standing Order No. 88 (Meetings of standing committees) with the substitution in that paragraph of "half-past eleven o'clock" for "one o'clock" and "a quarter to twelve o'clock" for "a quarter past one o'clock".—[*Mr. Mike Hall.*]

The House divided: Ayes 307, Noes 66.

Division No. 28] **[9.9 pm**

AYES

Ainger, Nick
Ainsworth, Robert *(Cov'try NE)*
Alexander, Douglas
Allen, Richard
Allen, Graham
Anderson, Janet *(Rossendale)*
Armstrong, Ms Hilary
Atherton, Ms Candy
Atkins, Charlotte
Baker, Norman
Ballard, Jackie
Banks, Tony
Battle, John
Bayley, Hugh
Beckett, Rt Hon Mrs Margaret
Begg, Miss Anne
Beggs, Roy
Beith, Rt Hon A J
Bell, Martin *(Tatton)*
Bennett, Andrew F
Berry, Roger
Best, Harold
Betts, Clive
Blackman, Liz
Blears, Ms Hazel
Blizzard, Bob
Boateng, Paul
Bradley, Keith *(Withington)*
Bradley, Peter *(The Wrekin)*
Bradshaw, Ben
Brand, Dr Peter
Breed, Colin
Brinton, Mrs Helen
Brown, Rt Hon Nick *(Newcastle E)*
Brown, Russell *(Dumfries)*
Browne, Desmond
Bruce, Malcolm *(Gordon)*
Buck, Ms Karen
Burgon, Colin
Butler, Mrs Christine
Byers, Rt Hon Stephen
Caborn, Richard
Campbell, Alan *(Tynemouth)*
Campbell, Mrs Anne *(C'bridge)*
Campbell, Menzies *(NE Fife)*
Campbell, Ronnie *(Blyth V)*
Caplin, Ivor
Caton, Martin
Chapman, Ben *(Wirral S)*
Chidgey, David
Chisholm, Malcolm
Claphsm, Michael
Clark, Rt Hon Dr David *(S Shields)*
Clark, Dr Lynda *(Edinburgh Pentlands)*
Clark, Paul *(Gillingham)*
Clarke, Charles *(Norwich S)*
Clelland, David
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ms Ann
Cohen, Harry
Colman, Tony
Connarty, Michael
Cooper, Yvette
Corbett, Robin
Corbyn, Jeremy
Corston, Ms Jean
Cotter, Brian
Cousins, Jim
Cox, Tom
Cranston, Ross
Crausby, David
Cryer, Mrs Ann *(Keighley)*
Cummings, John
Cunningham, Jim *(Cov'try S)*
Curtis-Thomas, Mrs Claire
Darling, Rt Hon Alistair
Darvill, Keith
Davey, Valerie *(Bristol W)*
Davidson, Ian
Davies, Rt Hon Denzil *(Llanelli)*
Dawson, Hilton
Dean, Mrs Janet
Denham, John
Dewar, Rt Hon Donald
Dismore, Andrew
Dobbin, Jim
Donohoe, Brian H
Doran, Frank
Dowd, Jim
Drew, David
Drown, Ms Julia
Eagle, Angela *(Wallasey)*
Eagle, Maria *(L'pool Garston)*
Fearn, Ronnie
Fisher, Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fitzsimons, Lorna
Flint, Caroline
Foster, Don *(Bath)*
Foster, Michael Jabez *(Hastings)*
Foster, Michael J *(Worcester)*
Foulkes, George
Fyfe, Maria
Galbraith, Sam
George, Andrew *(St Ives)*
Gerrard, Neil
Gibson, Dr Ian
Gilroy, Mrs Linda
Goggins, Paul
Gordon, Mrs Eileen
Gorrie, Donald
Griffiths, Jane *(Reading E)*
Griffiths, Nigel *(Edinburgh S)*
Griffiths, Win *(Bridgend)*
Grocott, Bruce
Grogan, John
Gunnell, John
Hain, Peter
Hall, Mike *(Weaver Vale)*
Hall, Patrick *(Bedford)*
Hanson, David
Harman, Rt Hon Ms Harriet
Harris, Dr Evan
Harvey, Nick
Heal, Mrs Sylvia
Heath, David *(Somerton & Frome)*
Hepburn, Stephen
Heppell, John
Hesford, Stephen
Hewitt, Ms Patricia
Hill, Keith

Hinchliffe, David
Hodge, Ms Margaret
Hoey, Kate
Home Robertson, John
Hoon, Geoffrey
Hope, Phil
Howarth, Alan *(Newport E)*
Howells, Dr Kim
Hughes, Ms Beverley *(Stretford)*
Hughes, Simon *(Southwark N)*
Humble, Mrs Joan
Hutton, John
Iddon, Dr Brian
Jackson, Ms Glenda *(Hampstead)*
Jackson, Helen *(Hillsborough)*
Jamieson, David
Jenkins, Brian
Johnson, Alan *(Hull W & Hessle)*
Jones, Barry *(Alyn & Deeside)*
Jones, Mrs Fiona *(Newark)*
Jones, Ms Jenny *(Wolverh'ton SW)*
Jones, Jon Owen *(Cardiff C)*
Jones, Nigel *(Cheltenham)*
Jowell, Ms Tessa
Keeble, Ms Sally
Keen, Ann *(Brentford & Isleworth)*
Keetch, Paul
Kennedy, Charles *(Ross Skye)*
Kennedy, Jane *(Wavertree)*
Kidney, David
Killoyle, Peter
King, Ms Oona *(Bethnal Green)*
Kingham, Ms Tess
Kirkwood, Archy
Kumar, Dr Ashok
Ladyman, Dr Stephen
Lawrence, Ms Jackie
Laxton, Bob
Leslie, Christopher
Levitt, Tom
Lewis, Ivan *(Bury S)*
Liddell, Mrs Helen
Livingstone, Ken
Livsey, Richard
Lloyd, Tony *(Manchester C)*
Love, Andrew
McAvoy, Thomas
McCafferty, Ms Chris
McCartney, Ian *(Makerfield)*
McDonagh, Siobhain
Macdonald, Calum
McGuire, Mrs Anne
McIsaac, Shona
McKenna, Mrs Rosemary
Mackinlay, Andrew
McNamara, Kevin
McNulty, Tony
MacShane, Denis
Mactaggart, Fiona
McWalter, Tony
Mahon, Mrs Alice
Mallaber, Judy
Marek, Dr John
Marsden, Paul *(Shrewsbury)*
Marshall, David *(Shettleston)*
Martlew, Eric
Maxton, John
Merron, Gillian
Michael, Alun
Michie, Bill *(Sheff'd Heeley)*
Michie, Mrs Ray *(Argyll & Bute)*
Milburn, Alan
Moffatt, Laura
Moore, Michael
Moran, Ms Margaret
Morgan, Alasdair *(Galloway)*
Morgan, Ms Julie *(Cardiff N)*
Morgan, Rhodri *(Cardiff W)*
Morris, Ms Estelle *(B'ham Yardley)*
Morris, Rt Hon John *(Aberavon)*
Mullin, Chris
Murphy, Denis *(Wansbeck)*
Murphy, Jim *(Eastwood)*
Murphy, Paul *(Torfaen)*
Naysmith, Dr Doug
Norris, Dan
Oaten, Mark
O'Brien, Bill *(Normanton)*
O'Brien, Mike *(N Warks)*
O'Hara, Eddie
Öpik, Lembit
Palmer, Dr Nick
Pearson, Ian
Pickthall, Colin
Pike, Peter L
Plaskitt, James
Pond, Chris
Pope, Greg
Powell, Sir Raymond
Prentice, Ms Bridget *(Lewisham E)*
Primarolo, Dawn
Prosser, Gwyn
Purchase, Ken
Quin, Ms Joyce
Quinn, Lawrie
Rammell, Bill
Rapson, Syd
Raynsford, Nick
Reed, Andrew *(Loughborough)*
Reid, Rt Hon Dr John *(Hamilton N)*
Rendel, David
Roche, Mrs Barbara
Rooker, Jeff
Roy, Frank
Ruddock, Ms Joan
Russell, Ms Christine *(Chester)*
Ryan, Ms Joan
Salter, Martin
Sanders, Adrian
Savidge, Malcolm
Sawford, Phil
Simpson, Alan *(Nottingham S)*
Singh, Marsha
Skinner, Dennis
Smith, Rt Hon Andrew *(Oxford E)*
Smith, Angela *(Basildon)*
Smith, Jacqui *(Redditch)*
Smith, John *(Glamorgan)*
Smith, Llew *(Blaenau Gwent)*
Soley, Clive
Southworth, Ms Helen
Spellar, John
Squire, Ms Rachel
Steinberg, Gerry
Stewart, David *(Inverness E)*
Stewart, Ian *(Eccles)*
Stinchcombe, Paul
Stoate, Dr Howard
Strang, Rt Hon Dr Gavin
Straw, Rt Hon Jack
Stringer, Graham
Stuart, Ms Gisela
Stunell, Andrew
Sutcliffe, Gerry
Taylor, Rt Hon Mrs Ann *(Dewsbury)*
Taylor, Ms Dari *(Stockton S)*
Taylor, David *(NW Leics)*
Thomas, Gareth *(Clwyd W)*
Timms, Stephen
Tipping, Paddy
Todd, Mark
Tonge, Dr Jenny
Touhig, Don
Trickett, Jon
Turner, Dennis *(Wolverh'ton SE)*
Turner, Dr George *(NW Norfolk)*
Twigg, Stephen *(Enfield)*
Tyler, Paul
Vaz, Keith
Vis, Dr Rudi
Wallace, James
Walley, Ms Joan
Ward, Ms Claire
Watts, David
White, Brian
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Wicks, Malcolm
Willis, Phil
Winnick, David
Winterton, Ms Rosie *(Doncaster C)*
Wood, Mike
Worthington, Tony
Wray, James
Wright, Anthony D *(Gt Yarmouth)*
Wright, Dr Tony *(Cannock)*
Wyatt, Derek

Tellers for the Ayes:
Miss Melanie Johnson and Dr. Phyllis Starkey.

NOES

Ancram, Rt Hon Michael
Barnes, Harry
Bercow, John
Brady, Graham
Brazier, Julian
Browning, Mrs Angela
Burnett, John
Butterfill, John
Chope, Christopher
Clappison, James
Clarke, Rt Hon Kenneth *(Rushcliffe)*
Collins, Tim
Cran, James
Curry, Rt Hon David
Davis, Rt Hon David *(Haltemprice)*
Day, Stephen
Dorrell, Rt Hon Stephen
Duncan Smith, Iain
Emery, Rt Hon Sir Peter
Fallon, Michael
Flynn, Paul
Forth, Rt Hon Eric
Fox, Dr Liam
Fraser, Christopher
Gale, Roger
Gibb, Nick
Gill, Christopher
Golding, Mrs Llin
Greenway, John
Gummer, Rt Hon John
Hammond, Philip
Hawkins, Nick
Hayes, John
Heald, Oliver
Heseltine, Rt Hon Michael
Howarth, Gerald *(Aldershot)*
Jack, Rt Hon Michael
Jenkin, Bernard
Laing, Mrs Eleanor
Lansley, Andrew
Lewis, Dr Julian *(New Forest E)*
Lidington, David
Luff, Peter
MacGregor, Rt Hon John
McLoughlin, Patrick
Nicholls, Patrick
Paice, James
Paterson, Owen
Pickles, Eric
Randall, John
Redwood, Rt Hon John
Robertson, Laurence *(Tewk'b'ry)*
Roe, Mrs Marion *(Broxbourne)*
Rowe, Andrew *(Faversham)*
Russell, Bob *(Colchester)*
St Aubyn, Nick
Spring, Richard
Stanley, Rt Hon Sir John
Swayne, Desmond
Syms, Robert
Taylor, Ian *(Esher & Walton)*
Taylor, John M *(Solihull)*
Waterson, Nigel
Willetts, David
Winterton, Mrs Ann *(Congleton)*
Winterton, Nicholas *(Macclesfield)*

Tellers for the Noes:
Mrs. Jacqui Lait and Mr. Dominic Grieve.

Question accordingly agreed to.

Business of the House

9.22 pm

The President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons (Mrs. Margaret Beckett): With permission, I should like to make a short business statement.

As the House is aware, we adjourn for the Christmas recess tomorrow. Following the exchanges at Prime Minister's questions today, and in the light of representations that have been made, the Government have decided that the business for tomorrow will now be a debate on Iraq, on a motion for the Adjournment of the House. The business previously announced for tomorrow will be taken at a later date.

I take this opportunity to confirm that the business for the week of 11 January will be as I announced last Thursday. It may help the House to know that we hope to take the Committee stage of the Greater London Authority Bill, or some part of it, in the following week.

Sir George Young (North-West Hampshire): The Opposition welcome the Government's decision to change the business tomorrow so that the House has an opportunity to debate this grave matter. Who will be speaking for the Government?

Mrs. Beckett: Cabinet colleagues will be opening and winding up the debate. *[Laughter.]*

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): When we may be about to ask British service men, and, increasingly, service women, to put their lives at risk, one would have thought that hilarity would form no part of our consideration.

On behalf of my colleagues, I welcome the right hon. Lady's announcement. It is an awesome responsibility to ask our armed forces to risk their lives on behalf of this country, and it is only right and proper that the House should have the opportunity to discuss the matter before the Christmas recess.

Mrs. Beckett: I am most grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman. In fairness to members of the Conservative Front Bench, I do not think that it was they who joined in the hilarity.

Sir Peter Emery (East Devon): The hilarity was in response to not knowing who would speak for the Government; it had nothing to do with our service men. They are the last people any of us would wish to laugh at. If our forces are to be deployed, will the Government have by tomorrow made up their mind whether the House will be recalled to deal with this very serious matter? I cannot expect the right hon. Lady to answer that today.

Mrs. Beckett: All these matters can be explored tomorrow. I conveyed the seriousness with which we take this matter by saying that Cabinet colleagues will both open and wind up the debate. The right hon. Gentleman will be aware that that is not normally the custom except for the most serious matters.

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): With permission, I shall put together the motions relating to delegated legislation.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith, pursuant to Standing Order No. 118(6) (Standing Committees on Delegated Legislation),

LEGAL AID AND ADVICE (SCOTLAND)

That the draft Criminal Legal Aid (Scotland) (Prescribed Proceedings) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 1998, which were laid before this House on 1st December, be approved.

That the draft Advice and Assistance (Assistance by Way of Representation) (Scotland) Amendment (No. 2) Regulations 1998, which were laid before this House on 1st December, be approved.

EDUCATION

That the draft Financing of Maintained Schools Regulations 1998, which were laid before this House on 3rd December, be approved.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Question agreed to.

PETITION

MMR Vaccine

9.25 pm

Caroline Flint (Don Valley): I bring before the House a petition of 4,800 signatures on behalf of members of the public and Patricia Revell and Kate Coull, who are mothers of autistic children. The petitioners are concerned about the safety of the measles, mumps and rubella vaccine, and the link between it and autism and inflammatory bowel conditions. They feel that several measures should be taken for the good of the children of this country.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Department of Health

to undertake a full research programme to prove the safety of the vaccine

to instigate further research into autism

and to set up and monitor a register of autistic children.

The petitioners remain, etc.

To lie upon the Table.

A14 (Cambridgeshire)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

9.26 pm

Mr. Andrew Lansley (South Cambridgeshire): I am most grateful for this opportunity to raise a matter of the greatest concern to my constituents and those of neighbouring constituencies. I am very pleased that my hon. Friend the Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice) and the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) are in their places. I am grateful that the Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Jackson) is to reply to the debate. I note that it is the second time today that she has had to do so. I suspect that, as we approach the end of 1998, she will receive the accolade of becoming the Minister who has responded to the most Adjournment debates this year. I thank her for staying with us for just one more time this year.

The debate is timely. The issues have often been raised with the Government by me, my predecessor and other Members. Circumstances surrounding the A14 have become of increasingly severe concern in my constituency, partly as a result of the rate at which accidents have occurred and the severity of such accidents, but principally as a result of the increase in traffic and congestion. Concern was reflected most recently by a dramatically large response in the region to a series of compelling articles in the *Cambridge Evening News.*

The A14 in Cambridgeshire is one of the most heavily used and congested trunk roads in the country. Seventy eight thousand vehicles a day travel on the three-lane section of the A14 between Cambridge and Huntingdon which passes through my constituency. The Highways Agency calculates that 66,000 vehicles a day travel on the two-lane section between Bar Hill and Huntingdon. The traffic has a very high heavy goods vehicle content: recent observations recorded 5,000 vehicles an hour at peak times, and, of those, one in four was a heavy goods vehicle.

The Minister has recently answered several questions on the issue. One such answer illustrated that the stretch of the A14 to which I have referred is among the 10 most heavily used sections of dual carriageway in the country. I am familiar with some of the others—for example, between the M25 and Southend, the A127 is a two-lane section with a high level of usage, but a considerable difference is the extent to which local traffic has been grade-separated on the A127 by the installation of new junctions and so on. Such safety measures have not been installed on all such roads.

The British Road Federation took the trouble to write to me when it became aware of this Adjournment debate. The BRF described the A14 as

"one of the most economically important routes in the country."

The debate is of significance for a wider region than simply my constituency and the neighbouring ones.

At each end of the stretch of road between Huntingdon and Cambridge in particular, two heavily used two-lane roads feed in. On one side there is the A14 east-west route coming in as a two-lane section. Recently the A1(M) was opened, as the Minister knows, by her noble Friend Lord Whitty. That road from the north is a four-lane section coming down towards Huntingdon, so on that side there are six lanes feeding into the A14. At the other end, there is the A14 going on to the east coast ports and the M11 going down to the M25 and the Dartford bridge.

A classic bottleneck is thus created on a trans-European network. The road is in a unique category. I do not know of any other road anywhere in the country that occupies such a critical position for east-west traffic and also for north-south traffic. It so happens that its orientation from the north-west to the south-east makes it a convenient part of routes in both those significant directions. Once the A1-M1 link was completed, it was clear that high levels of traffic growth could occur in the future.

The road is not congested simply by trunk road traffic. It is also used for local purposes, which gives rise to a serious complication. Originally, in 1972, it was designed to be a three-lane all-purpose carriageway. The stretch in question was built only as a two-lane carriageway. I imagine that the policy of "predict and provide" did not exist then, but even at that early stage, expectations of a need for a three-lane section were rare. That is what should have been built.

In the past 10 years there has been a 68 per cent. growth in traffic. There has been a significant increase since the opening of the A1-M1 link. I suspect that the upgrading of the A1 to motorway standard up to Peterborough will in due course lead to a further increase in traffic, although in a reply to me a day or two ago, the Minister suggested that that would not be the case. We shall see.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry referred to Cambridge today as a growth centre. In response to questions after his statement, the right hon. Gentleman made it clear that he would foster economic development in areas such as Cambridge. The White Paper states that

"the Government is reviewing how the planning system can best help promote the needs of clusters of businesses in growth industries; and the implications for their expansion for other land uses such as housing and transport infrastructure."

Not only is the road critical for existing transport purposes, but the pressures on the road make it impossible to contemplate economic development such as that envisaged by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, or development of the kind proposed at Alconbury, which is the subject of consideration by Huntingdon district council. It is extremely difficult to consider the proposals for a new settlement close to Cambridge. One of the principal suggestions for that is a site north of the A14, with considerable traffic on and off that road.

We must recognise that—in the absence of significant change in the area's transport infrastructure and, most particularly, the upgrading of the A14—those developments would be unsustainable. The Government may soon be contemplating economic development and its promotion in the Cambridge area, which will not be achieved without a Government U-turn in respect of transport infrastructure and the A14 in particular.

I am told that the Highways Agency estimates that the theoretical capacity on the two-lane section of the A14 is 68,000 vehicles a day, and that traffic flow would begin to break down at that point, with congestion occurring. On-site observations by Cambridgeshire county council have shown that breakdown occurs at about 50,000 vehicles a day and becomes increasingly severe.

[Mr. Andrew Lansley]

Unfortunately congestion occurs daily and the consequences are severe. The number of accidents is high, and a personal injury accident occurs every three days on that road. People in and around my constituency and the Minister will know that a serious accident on 18 November at Lolworth resulted in a fatality. Given the circumstances, it could easily have led to additional deaths.

Hon. Members will realise that when a road arrives at the point at which congestion is assumed to occur, people divert on to other roads. Measurement of congestion on the A14 cannot be achieved simply by looking at how many cars use it, because drivers are increasingly using other local roads and causing congestion. There is rat running through villages such as Hilton and along the A428, which is virtually at full capacity. On that road, at the new village settlement of Cambourne, 3,300 new homes are being built, and the first will be sold in the summer of next year. There is increasingly no way out on the road. When blockages occur on the A14, the consequences are congestion in all those neighbouring villages, and congestion and blockages on many neighbouring roads such as the A1198 and the A428. In some villages adjacent to the A14 there is gridlock. Two examples will suffice. Bar Hill is a substantial village of some 3,000 homes, which exits only on to the A14. There is no other way in and out, so when the A14 is congested—it is often congested in both directions at the same time—traffic backs up into the village and people cannot come and go.

The small village of Lolworth exits only on to the westbound carriageway of the A14. If one wants to go from Lolworth to Cambridge, one has to go west to the next junction and then come back on the eastbound carriageway. People have to enter and exit the carriageway twice, and they have two chances of meeting congestion. I once stood in the centre of the village when the A14 was blocked. Cars shot past me on Lolworth high street, going to the top of the village. Five minutes later they shot back again.

The Minister will appreciate that the road—which is part of a trans-European network, part of the trunk road system and an integral and vital part of the national road structure—is essentially a local road for certain purposes. That is one reason why we must deal with the road. Otherwise, life in the neighbouring area will become unbearable.

Comprehensive improvements to the A14 were in the Government's trunk road programme, but in July Ministers took them out of the self-styled targeted programme of improvements and substituted the proposal for a multi-modal study. In the past few days the Minister disclosed in a parliamentary answer that the start date for the study, in tranche 2, will be 2000–01. As the Minister has previously said that the study itself will take a year to complete, that means that it will be at least three years, and perhaps four, before we know whether the Government intend to upgrade the A14. No doubt Ministers will then say that design studies and public consultation have to be undertaken and programme finance sought. By that time, Cambridgeshire will have been strangled by gridlock.

My purpose tonight is to urge Ministers to recognise the need for urgent action and to respond in four key ways. First, the Highways Agency should undertake immediate traffic flow management and safety measures. A study in December 1995 identified 14 potential improvements. Others could now be contemplated, including stronger safety barriers, and so on.

In response to recent questions, the Minister told me that a number of those improvements are to take place in the spring of next year. Among the measures identified three years ago, the most important, relating to slip roads and lay-bys, are not yet planned, and I urge the Minister that they should be.

Secondly, the Government have dropped the A14 improvement from the programme. That decision was flawed. Using the Government's own criteria for the assessment of environmental impact, safety, economic factors, accessibility and integration, and based on a study completed by Cambridgeshire county council, it is clear that the improvement of the A14 would bring large and quantifiable benefits.

For example, without giving an exhaustive account, in relation to environmental impact, the county council has identified an extensive reduction in noise pollution and a reduction in rat running, to which I have referred. In relation to safety, poor design of the junctions and the entry and exit points has given rise to high accident levels.

On the economy, I refer to the views of the British Road Federation and to the importance of Cambridge as a sub-region and the long journey times faced by companies which are having to engage in just-in-time deliveries and, as a matter of course, to build in the potential for considerable delays when using the road for deliveries.

On accessibility and public transport, many buses going into and out of Cambridge use the A14. Therefore, even public transport is significantly failing because of the character of the road. At certain points, the A14 is also a dangerous road for pedestrians. Last Sunday, there was a tragic death on the northern bypass, so there is a clear danger there.

On the potential for integration between different modes of transport, the A14 is not well optimised for multi-modal activity or for transfer between different transport modes. I suspect that it could not be without grade separation between the trunk road and local roads.

I look to the Minister this evening to concede that when the July announcements were made, and "A New Deal for Trunk Roads: Understanding the New Approach to Appraisal" was published, no full assessment of the A14 was made in those terms. Will she now agree to consider, perhaps jointly with the Highways Agency and Cambridgeshire county council, those five criteria in relation to the road and see whether the decision was flawed and can be reviewed?

As an alternative to improvements to the A14 in the programme, the Government seek a multi-modal study. I am sure that both sides of the House will agree that to maximise the use of public transport is clearly right, but my third point is to seek from the Minister a concession to reality—that there is, in truth, no prospect of meeting a significant part of the present traffic use, still less the whole of the future traffic growth, by public transport options. Therefore, whatever the outcome of the multi-modal study, significant improvement, upgrade and grade separation of the A14 is part of the solution.

In parallel with the multi-modal study, there should be design studies. If they progress rapidly, public consultation should occur in parallel with the multi-modal study on preparing the A14 for an upgrade at some time.

If the study is not made relatively soon, there will be no chance of the road being upgraded within the next 10 years, and that would be wholly unacceptable. Therefore, whatever happens, I ask the Minister to assure the House, my constituents and the people of Cambridgeshire that three years would simply be too long. If such a study is to be made, it should be included in tranche 1. I shall certainly be pressing for that in the regional planning conference, although I hope that the Minister will pre-empt that undertaking, and herself undertake to consider including the study in tranche 1.

Does the Minister accept that, whatever happens, the A14 must be improved so that local traffic is separated from the trunk road? It really is untenable for the situation to continue—a situation that applies also on stretches of the A1, and that has provided part of the reasoning behind proposed improvements on that road—in which large amounts of local traffic enter and exit the A14, thereby making lane changes. The presence of such traffic is the reason why there are so many dangers on the A14. Does the Minister accept that we must find ways of keeping local traffic off the main road?

I am not interested simply in laying tarmac over South Cambridgeshire or driving a motorway through my constituency for the sake of it—far from it. We should not be in the business of building roads except when they are strictly necessary. However, I am determined—on the basis of observation, evidence and the views of my constituents—that we must accept a realistic approach to the road. There is no way forward for transport along the corridor except the improvement of the A14. Improvement of the A14 would meet the Government's own criteria—not of predicting and providing or of catering for future traffic growth, but of dealing with the congestion and bottlenecks currently in the system. Congestion and bottlenecks are occurring and have to be dealt with on the basis of current evidence.

Development is coming fast, and the infrastructure is not coping and will not cope with it. If action does not come soon, there will be further deaths and injuries, and congestion will worsen rapidly. Moreover, the local economy and, in some respects, the national economy, will become gridlocked. The Road Haulage Association and the British Road Federation have testified to the road's critical economic importance. The British Road Federation, in a letter to me, itself regretted the Government's apparent lack of urgency in finding a solution to the problem.

Thousands of my constituents know only too well that their lives will be made ever more miserable until the road is improved. I call on the Minister to show understanding, and to respond positively to this debate.

As I realise that the situation will not be changed before Christmas, I should like, through the medium of this debate, to suggest to my constituents that they should try over the Christmas period to stay at home and not drive on the road. If they do have to drive, I ask them to drive safely.

I should like also to wish the Minister—when the time comes—a happy Christmas, especially if she is able in her reply to bring added Christmas cheer to my constituents by responding positively to some of the points that I have raised.

9.48 pm

Mrs. Anne Campbell (Cambridge): I congratulate the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) on securing this debate, and I thank him for his courtesy in allowing me to speak in it.

I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister is quite surprised to hear me speaking on roads, as she knows from her previous experience of hearing me speak in transport debates that I usually talk about pedestrians, cyclists and public transport, specifically rail transport. She knows that I am a great champion of those means of transport. However, the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire has made some valuable points, and there is cross-party support in the county council and in the city of Cambridge for some improvement to be made to the A14.

I should like to take a little time to explain the reasons why improvement to the A14 is necessary, and perhaps to go back over some history. It may be helpful to do so.

The previous Government decided not to continue with the A14 widening scheme. I have a letter from John Watts, the previous transport Minister, to Cambridgeshire county council in February 1997. He explained:

"The A14-M11-A10 Widening Scheme was withdrawn from the programme after careful consideration of the scheme's economics and the environmental data, to remove uncertainty and planning blight."

That decision of the previous Government has been continued by this one.

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry made a statement on the competitiveness White Paper today. Last Monday I was fortunate enough to visit a firm on the Cambridge science park. I must apologise to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), because I think that it is in his constituency, but it is only a few feet over the border with mine—apologies if they are due. I always feel that the science park should belong to Cambridge city and I am sorry that it does not.

The firm, Biogemma, is owned by a French company that thinks it important to have a research outlet on the Cambridge science park because of the world-beating research that goes on there. It employs about 40 people in high-value jobs, doing research into food technology. The managing director told me that the transport situation has become very difficult, because whenever there is an accident on the A14, the traffic backs up down Milton road. It is impossible even for those trying to travel within Cambridge to get out of the science park, let alone those going on to the A14. They are virtually trapped in the science park. That is not conducive to good business on the science park, so there is a real and immediate problem.

Those who work on the science park should be looking at alternative means of transport. Unfortunately, for many of them such alternative means are not in place. We do not have a rail link even part of the way to Huntingdon. If the Cambridge to St. Ives rail line were reopened—I have campaigned for that for many years—there would be an alternative and people would be able to leave their cars behind. However, that facility is not in place.

[Mrs. Anne Campbell]

Earlier this year I wrote to the county council to find out whether that route was still on its list of projects that should go ahead. My reply from the assistant director of planning said:

"the Council's current policy is to pursue the development of a rail link on this route."

I am pleased to report that and to support it. The assistant director went on:

"It seems likely that any public transport service along this route will need to be funded through a combination of PFI and developer contributions, and we will be meeting with the Government Office to discuss this once growth options for the Cambridge sub-region have been explored".

Desirable though a railway line is, I am afraid that it still seems a long way off. The problems, however, are immediate. I want essential safety measures to be carried out on the A14 and I support the plea of the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire for an earlier study than the second tranche study that has been promised. We need to look at the A14 corridor, the rail link and the road link and see what essential improvements can be made.

I entirely support the Government's transport policy. It is absolutely right that we should try to reduce road transport which causes pollution and congestion and is not an efficient means of moving people from A to B. I hope that in the long term, most people who use the A14 will find an alternative route by rail, bus or some means other than private cars. Many of them could, if the alternatives were available.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): When?

Mrs. Campbell: There was no need for that shouted remark, as I am being entirely supportive. There are no alternatives at the moment and it is likely to be a long time before there are. I am asking for a short-term solution to ensure both that my constituents can travel in safety, and that the essential economic development on the science park in Cambridge is not hindered by the lack of an alternative transport option.

9.56 pm

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) for allowing me to contribute briefly to the debate, and congratulate him on the lucid way in which he has described the problems of the A14 and on his good fortune in choosing a day when we have been able to have a slightly longer than usual Adjournment debate. The extra time has allowed the hon. Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) and me to contribute to the debate—I hope that is valuable.

The stretch of the A14 to which my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire referred was in my constituency until the boundary changes prior to the general election, so I have witnessed the continuing increase in traffic and the worsening situation. It is perhaps surprising to people who spend most of their time in or around London to learn that I believe the A14 can get as bad as the M25 on a bad day and the traffic on that stretch can be absolutely awful. As my hon. Friend said, many people who wish to use it now have to build in a lot of extra time to compensate for those delays.

I would make one point about the delays. As a user of that road and other two-lane dual carriageways, it seems to me that whatever the theoretical capacity of a road, there is a tendency for almost everyone to drive on the outside lane. The reason for that is usually heavy goods vehicles, one trying to overtake another and both operating at the maximum allowed by the governor on their engines. They overtake imperceptibly slowly and sometimes even have to fall back eventually, with the result that huge queues of traffic build up behind them—leaving the inside lane almost entirely empty. Any theoretical capacity is thus completely destroyed. Perhaps the Minister could attempt to find a way in which that could be addressed as there would be a greater throughput of traffic if both lanes were used properly.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Essex (Mr. Jenkin), the shadow Minister, knows full well the importance of the A14. Indeed he used to work in a company in my constituency and has experienced the same problems as my constituents.

I have consistently supported the opening up of the railway line from Cambridge to St. Ives. It is an existing link, all bar three miles at one end. Under the previous Government, at my invitation a former Minister of rail, now Lord Freeman, came to meetings with Cambridge county council, Railtrack, the Railway Development Society and all the other organisations and even walked part of the track to see how that railway could play its part in assisting with traffic movement. It had the particular advantage of running close to the science park to which the hon. Lady referred and the Cambridge regional college which thousands of students attend daily. Sadly, that initiative died away because Railtrack could not be enthused about the idea.

Disagreements about cost have also come to the fore. Even if my dearest wish came true and the line was opened—

It being Ten o'clock, the motion for the Adjournment of the House lapsed, without Question put.

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

Mr. Paice: Even the reopening of the railway line would not make the dramatic improvement that we want. The hon. Member for Cambridge—I do not say this in a partisan spirit—is living in cloud cuckoo land if she believes that public transport could solve the problems of the A14, although it would make a contribution. As my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire said, the A14 must continue to be a vital link in the nation's arteries.

Mrs. Anne Campbell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Paice: I would rather not, as I know that the Minister wants a good amount of time, although I may give way in a moment.

I entirely endorse the view of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire that we should not wait three years for the study. The hon. Member for Cambridge wrongly said that the previous Government removed the A14 from the programme of improvements. The previous Government removed from the programme only the section of the road between the M11 and the

A10, which forms part of the Cambridge northern bypass in my constituency. My hon. Friend was referring to the section between Cambridge and Huntingdon, which was removed from the programme by the current Government. Now that I have corrected the hon. Lady, I happily give way.

Mrs. Campbell: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I was arguing for an earlier study. I did not say that greater use of public transport would substantially reduce the amount of traffic on the A14, although I do believe that a study is needed to determine whether that would be the case.

Mr. Paice: A study certainly is needed more urgently than the Minister has suggested in answers to parliamentary questions.

A significant length of the A14 remains within my constituency; it stretches almost from the Girton interchange with the M11 to the Suffolk border. As I acknowledged, the previous Government removed from the improvement programme a section of the Cambridge northern bypass. That decision was partly influenced by the public inquiry at the time into an application to build a superstore on the northern fringe of Cambridge, and by the possibility that that superstore would contribute to the improvement of the A14.

I congratulate the Deputy Prime Minister on his decision to reject that application—that took a weight off the minds of many of my constituents in the villages of Histon and Impington. However, it also removed the possibility of any financial contribution to the improvement of the northern bypass, where the traffic problems are almost as severe as they are between Cambridge and Huntingdon.

The problem affects not only road users, however. The northern bypass cuts close to much housing, so noise is also a serious problem. Despite the fact that my constituents in Histon and Impington and the constituents of my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire in Girton and further east in Bottisham have experienced a huge increase in the amount of traffic on the A14 since the opening of the A1-M1 link, nothing has been done about noise.

I have pursued the matter for some time. The problem goes back to 1972, when a public inquiry into the construction of the road recommended the erection of noise screens. We are still waiting for those screens. I have tried several times over the years to persuade the Minister's predecessors of both parties, and the Highways Agency, to take action. I keep being told that it cannot be done unless there is a new road. The fact is that the A14 is, effectively, a new road because, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire has said, it is now taking a vastly increased amount of traffic compared with what it was designed for in 1972. We then had the excuse that there would be a new shopping centre.

Later, the Minister told me to wait for the White Paper, which I did. However, there is still no real progress on how to address the serious problem of traffic noise affecting many of my constituents. How much longer will they have to wait for the screening which was promised in the 1972 public inquiry? I accept, as the Minister will point out, that my party has been in government for much of the period since then. But I still make the point—particularly as the Government have taken the further improvements out of the programme—that although the Minister asked me to wait for the White Paper, we still have had no answer to the problem of noise.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for South Cambridgeshire for allowing me to contribute, as we have a serious problem. We have a Minister responsible for roads, although it seems that the construction of roads is virtually disappearing at present. I hope that the Minister will consult her colleagues about how to address a major problem.

This is, as we have pointed out, a problem that faces all of us who live and work in and around the Cambridge area; but it also affects businesses all over the country that use that road. Some vehicles come down the east coast on the A1 from Scotland and wish to go through the Dartford tunnel, or to east London. Others go from Birmingham to Felixstowe port, accounting for a vast amount of HGV traffic using the road. The A14 is a major part of the nation's road system, so I hope that the Minister can encourage us in the belief that it will get better.

10.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (Ms Glenda Jackson): I begin my thanking the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire (Mr. Lansley) for his seasonal greetings, which I reciprocate. I am in no position to know whether I have responded to the majority of Adjournment debates during this Session, but I am fairly confident that whoever holds that debatable prize is from my Department.

I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire for his generosity in affording time to my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Mrs. Campbell) and to the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice). All three contributions have highlighted the problems over a wide range of areas caused by congestion on our roads network. The speeches touched on the impact of congestion upon our environment, and my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge referred to the concerns of her constituents and the impact that congestion has on business—a point made also by the hon. Members for South Cambridgeshire and for South-East Cambridgeshire.

The call for speed in tackling the problem came from all three hon. Members, who highlighted the desperate need for a strategic approach to transport and traffic. That is why the Government took the time we did over the roads review, and why we issued the first comprehensive transport document—the White Paper—for two decades. It is abundantly clear to everyone that we must move away from the old predict-and-provide system for roads, and we need a much more integrated approach to dealing with managing our roads system so that there can be a flow of traffic.

As the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire said, we are talking about a road that links the country to many vital ports of both ingress and exit. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire pointed out that it is part of the national road network, and spoke of the trans-European links, reminding us that the road serves the national network, as well as being depended on by local residents.

It is abundantly clear that the old predict and provide is not a way of tackling our problems of traffic and transport, not only in the short and medium term but in

[Ms Glenda Jackson]

the long term. There were recurring themes in all three speeches this evening, concerning accidents and congestion. All three urged speed on the part of the Government with regard to the multi-modal study promised to this section of road.

New unpublished Highways Agency work that has just been completed covering the years 1995–98 shows a rate of 0.17 personal injury accidents per million vehicle kilometres on the A14. That is the same as the national average. The severity ratio has dropped in those three years to below 18 per cent., which is three quarters of the national average. The accident record of the A14 is no worse than the national average for all-purpose dual-carriageway roads.

I know that that is of absolutely no comfort to anyone who has suffered, or fears suffering, an accident. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire mentioned the tragedy of a fatal accident. The Highways Agency has plans to improve safety on the route. As the hon. Gentleman pointed out, traffic flows on the Cambridgeshire section are the highest on the route, and the proportion of heavy goods vehicles is twice the national average. We share the concerns about safety.

In 1995, the Highways Agency commissioned a study from consulting engineers Thorburn Colquhoun to investigate accidents and congestion on this length of the A14 and propose safety measures. The first stage of the safety improvements was carried out in 1995–96, when speed cameras were provided to help to reduce traffic speeds.

Further safety-related measures to be carried out by next spring include various junction improvements, with small-scale widening, improved signing with advisory speed limits, and the laying of anti-skid surfacing at off-slip roads. An acceleration lane is being constructed on the eastbound carriageway of the Hemingford Abbots junction. Signing and lining improvements are being provided in the Girton interchange to improve lane discipline and the flow of traffic. Queue warning signs will be provided on the Cambridge northern bypass, and work is being done to identify further safety improvements.

A programme of improvements to the lay-bys is planned for next year, as the accident study showed that many accidents were associated with lay-bys. Investment in better information for drivers is also planned. West of Huntingdon and the A1, schemes are being prepared to change four existing single-level junctions between Thrapston and Brampton to grade-separated junctions. The Highways Agency has just reached agreement with Cambridgeshire police on the provision of additional speed cameras, to be funded by the agency, to supplement the two already on the A14 at Lolworth and Hemingford Grey. Those new units will be erected by the spring.

As part of its brief for improving the planning of highway investment and improving services, and in support of the Government's integrated transport and land use planning policies, the Highways Agency has embarked on a series of route management strategy trials to examine routes from various operational standpoints. The whole of the A14, from the M1-M6 to Felixstowe, is one of those trial routes.

The trial began in April 1998, and is due to conclude in April 1999. It is being taken forward in partnership with local authorities, the police, other transport providers along the route corridor, road users and environmental interest groups. We expect the results to point to further measures to improve traffic management, network control and information for drivers. The agency now has a toolkit of measures that it can use, and it is operating as part of our framework for integrated transport.

Before I move on from those short-term improvements to the longer-term future for the A14 in Cambridgeshire, I want to look back briefly to the past. Under the 1989 "roads for prosperity" initiative, improvements were proposed from west of the A1 through to widening of the Cambridge northern bypass. Although consultants did a great deal of preliminary work on the schemes, little serious progress was made. None of them even reached the first major stage of scheme preparation where the public are consulted on alternative alignments.

That is a sign that major change to the A14 in Cambridgeshire is not a straightforward proposition. There are very substantial environmental and technical issues, particularly around Huntingdon, the M11 and north of Cambridge. Successive reductions in the programme reduced the scheme from motorway to all-purpose trunk road standard, and finally, in 1996, the scheme for widening the A14 Cambridge northern bypass from the M11 to the A10 was withdrawn entirely.

On the A14 in Cambridgeshire, we therefore inherited proposals for grade-separated junctions west of the A1, and major schemes east of the A1, costing around £200 million, which had been withdrawn or shelved. We consulted widely on our proposals for integrated transport and the roads review, and produced our policy statements in July and a seven-year targeted programme of improvements—TPI—for trunk roads. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire asked whether we had applied our five new criteria to the A14 before we withdrew it from the targeted programme of improvements, and I can assure him that we did so.

Mr. Lansley: The application of the criteria for those roads included in the TPI has been published. Will the Minister undertake to publish the judgments made by the Highways Agency on the A14, so that we may consider, and if necessary challenge, them, because they are often qualitative?

Ms Jackson: I should be happy to do that, but I understood from what the hon. Gentleman said, and the contributions made by my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge and the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire, that speed was of the essence. I cannot see what purpose would be served by asking anyone to refer back to a decision that had already been made, when what I have heard tonight is that the hon. Members wish to urge the Government to make progress on the issue.

I am sure that all hon. Members agree that it is not possible to achieve the desired result overnight. Any solution will take time. The hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire has argued tonight that the Government's multi-modal study proposal should be not in the second tranche of such studies but in the first. I shall come to that proposition later in my speech. The hon. Gentleman now seems to be arguing that we should go back and attempt to unpick a decision that has already been made.

He implied that the decision was somehow rushed, or that the road was not tested against the criteria against which all other roads have been tested, but that is not the case.

Mr. Lansley: I think that the hon. Lady has misunderstood the purpose of publishing the criteria, the application of which could be instrumental in how the multi-modal study is constructed. Some work on the study could be short-circuited, because, if it is apparent that, for example, the use of some modes of public transport or the environmental impact could be improved by upgrading the A14, we could move immediately towards some of the conclusions of the multi-modal study, instead of having to go through all the criteria ab initio.

Ms Jackson: I apologise if I have misunderstood the hon. Gentleman, but it seemed that the final sentence of his previous intervention suggested that the criteria could be challenged, and that led me to believe that he was asking to go back rather than forward.

The junction improvements between Thrapston and Brampton, west of the A1, will be taken forward as safety schemes. However, the major schemes east of the A1, which are of most concern to the hon. Gentleman, were not sufficiently well advanced to be contenders for the targeted programme of improvements. Major road projects on the scale being considered are bound to require the full process of public consultation, preferred route selection, statutory orders and a public inquiry before going ahead. Those processes all take time.

As I have said in a slightly different way, we want to move away from a piecemeal approach to transport investment, and to find long-term solutions. The old approach of simply trying to build our way out of problems on our roads is discredited, and we need to consider the role that modes such as public transport can play, as the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge said.

Those hon. Members, and the hon. Member for South-East Cambridgeshire (Mr. Paice), have spoken of the potential of a railway line between Cambridge and St. Ives. We have announced, as part of the outcome of the roads review, a programme of studies to consider the most urgent problems not tackled by the targeted programme of improvements. One will be a multi-modal study of the Cambridge-Huntingdon corridor.

The multi-modal studies will examine the contribution that all modes can make to tackling transport problems, while supporting regional strategies for land use and economic development over the coming decades. We will thus consider the A14 from Cambridge to the A1 in the round, taking into account not only road aspects and options but rail possibilities and bus proposals. We have no preconceptions about the likely range of measures that could emerge from the study. We intend to produce solutions that consider all the problems and all the options, and we are not going to be dictated to by pressure to keep pace with traffic growth by building more and more roads.

In taking the studies forward, we intend to consult widely, and to involve a range of interests, so that, as far as possible, there is ownership and support for the solutions that emerge. Each study will have a steering group, chaired initially by Government offices for the regions, and including the regional planning bodies, regional development agencies, the Highways Agency, transport providers and users, and environmental organisations.

Mr. Lansley: Will the hon. Lady consider consulting not only the regional planning conference, but Cambridgeshire county council? The section of road to which she refers is in Cambridgeshire, and it is the competent body. I hope that she will give the council a greater status and role in consultation on the study.

Ms Jackson: It would be highly unlikely for Cambridgeshire county council not to be represented on one of, if not all, the bodies to which I referred. Clearly, there must also be consultation with the users, and with environmental organisations.

The results of the studies will be considered by regional planning bodies as part of the regional transport strategy that will in future be an integral part of regional planning guidance. When my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister signs up to a regional transport strategy, he will be showing that the Government endorse the investment priorities in the strategy.

As to the timing of these studies, the Minister for Roads and Road Safety announced in another place last Thursday the programme for the targeted programme of improvements and the proposals for taking the studies forward. Regional planning conferences are being asked for their views on the coverage of the study programme, and the timing and scope of the studies. We are seeking replies by 29 January, and will decide the final programme quickly after we receive all the views from the regions.

We propose to take forward a programme of about 26 studies in total. Those are major, resource-intensive pieces of work, so it will not be possible to take them all forward in parallel. The smaller studies, such as the Cambridge-to-Huntingdon A14 road—which, although complex in the considerations that need to be taken into account, is simple in that it deals with only one corridor route—would probably begin, in a second tranche, in 2000 or soon after. However, we shall be happy to consider alternative timetables put forward by the regional planning bodies. I know that that stretch of road is a priority for the regional bodies.

Our approach to the trunk road programme is a realistic one. Unlike the previous Administration, we shall not produce a wish list, or attempt far more projects than can be delivered. We have heard tonight in the contributions from Cambridgeshire Members a graphic illustration of that approach.

We have defined a new role for the Highways Agency as network operator, giving greater emphasis to encouraging the best use of the network. With the agency's recently established structure of area managers, it is well organised to maintain the network and develop essential safety schemes in the shorter term. Our studies will lead to effective longer-term transport solutions that

[Ms Jackson]

are both affordable and deliverable. We shall put making better use of existing transport infrastructure, supporting public transport and managing demand before new construction.

I thank the hon. Member for South Cambridgeshire and the other hon. Members who have spoken for bringing the A14 in Cambridgeshire to the attention of the House. It is an important matter, with wide implications not only for the immediate area, but for the whole of the United Kingdom. I shall ensure that my noble Friend the Minister for Roads and Road Safety is made aware of this evening's debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Adjourned accordingly at twenty-seven minutes past Ten o'clock.

House of Commons

Thursday 17 December 1998

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MADAM SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

The Minister was asked—

Farm-fresh Turkeys

1. **Judy Mallaber** (Amber Valley): If he will make a statement on the marketing of farm-fresh turkeys. [62985]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The number of traditional outlets available to the trade has declined over the years but the traditional farm-fresh turkey sector does have a loyal base of customers who continue to look for high-quality fresh birds. Farm-fresh turkeys give consumers a choice and the Government would like to see that traditional production continue.

Early this morning, I visited a traditional farm-fresh turkey farm to see the production methods at first hand. To avoid any doubt, I can tell the House that the writers of recent press stories in *The Times*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Evening Standard* were all guilty of telling porkies about turkeys. Farm-fresh turkeys are not under threat and their production and marketing have our full support.

Judy Mallaber: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer. I am very much looking forward to eating traditional Welsh turkey on Christmas day. Will my hon. Friend explain exactly how those press reports arose and why there was confusion about whether European Union regulations would mean that farm-fresh turkeys would not be allowed? Will he confirm absolutely that the traditional British turkey is safe?

Mr. Rooker: Farm-fresh turkeys, marketed correctly in the traditional way, are a very small share of the turkey market, but customers can be assured that traditional farm-fresh turkeys are all British; they are never frozen; there are no added chemicals; they are dry plucked with no water drenching and, furthermore, they are not found on sale in supermarkets—customers go to a proper, traditional butcher to buy them.

Mr. Bernard Jenkin (North Essex): Will the Minister tell the House what representations he has received from the turkey industry about the poultrymeat hygiene regulations and his efforts to gold-plate them? Will he tell the House what proportion of turkeys are now imported instead of being produced in this country, as a result of the excessive regulation that he is now making worse?

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman has it completely wrong.

Mr. Jenkin *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Rooker: No, the hon. Gentleman is completely wrong. Unlicensed farm-fresh turkeys, under the limit of 10,000 slaughtered a year, are not affected by EU regulations. They are not affected, we have no proposal to bring them under EU regulations—indeed, we have no proposal to introduce further regulations for small producers on farms.

We are holding consultations about an issue that was left unchecked by the previous Government: the small, unlicensed slaughterhouses, mainly in urban areas, of which there are only about three dozen. Those slaughterhouses are not covered by the regulations, although they should be. The Conservative Government neglected to deal with that matter and that is why we are holding consultations. The traditional farm-fresh turkeys that are the subject of the question are not affected in any way by any change in the regulations.

Genetically Modified Foods

2. **Mr. Gareth R. Thomas** (Harrow, West): What safeguards his Department has introduced to ensure that consumers have adequate information on genetically modified foods. [62986]

14. **Mr. Tony McNulty** (Harrow, East): What steps the Government are taking to ensure the clear labelling of genetically modified foods. [62998]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The Government are committed to providing clear information to enable consumers to make informed choices about genetically modified foods, including the labelling of all foods containing genetically modified material.

Mr. Thomas: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. Will he assure me that all genetically modified food products are clearly labelled so that consumers can make the informed choices that they want about the food that they eat? In the light of public concern, will he reassure the House that he will keep the quality of such labelling under review?

Mr. Rooker: Yes, most certainly. There are only four genetically modified products on sale in this country at present: maize, soya, tomato paste and vegetarian cheese. They all have to be labelled if the ingredients are genetically modified. We hope to co-operate with our European partners in getting additives covered over the next 12 months, but that will require EU regulation.

Mr. McNulty: May I assure my hon. Friend that Harrow is not the centre of genetically modified food in this country? It is a pure coincidence that my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow, West (Mr. Thomas) and I have tabled questions on that subject today.

Given the conflicting scientific advice, will my hon. Friend assure the House that he will stick firmly to the precautionary principle and ensure that, in terms of both debate and advice, the public are informed as much as possible, and will he resist those who scaremonger irresponsibly on the issue?

Mr. Rooker: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. We have opened up the meetings of the advisory committees that advise the Government on the issue and their minutes are now published. The Advisory Committee on Novel Foods and Processes held its second open meeting a few days ago to discuss how we can take forward long-term monitoring of genetically modified foods once they are more widely available on the market. On 21 October, a new Cabinet Committee on Biotechnology and Genetic Modification was announced and that Committee has now met. This morning, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office announced a Government review of the framework of all the advisory committees on biotechnology so that we ensure that we have the right pattern of advice to the Government.

Mr. John Bercow (Buckingham): Will the hon. Gentleman accept that, although it is desirable to provide information, labelling and, if necessary, a monitoring system, it is important to retain a sense of balance? Will the Minister, who, by the standards of Labour Ministers, has always struck me as a relatively normal individual—*[Laughter.]* I realise that I have probably already inflicted grave damage on the hon. Gentleman's reputation with that observation. Will he confirm that, while he is a Minister and responsible for these matters, the cause of information will not be overtaken by politically correct fetishists with a hostility to the British food industry?

Mr. Rooker: I note that the hon. Gentleman speaks under the protection of parliamentary privilege in respect of his first comment. I understand the tone of his question and, by and large, the answer is yes. We will conduct this policy on the basis of the best science available. We will not shut out from our deliberations any scientists who are not in the loop and who have other views about this issue. We will listen to them. We will operate the precautionary principle and ensure, for example, that, as the crops begin to grow, they will be introduced in a managed way. It will not be uncontrolled. To that extent, we will work using the best science and be as open and transparent as possible.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Does the Minister agree that the fact that one in five of the official Government sites for genetically modified crops is breaking the regulation governing the trials is undermining public confidence in a potentially valuable method of food production and fuelling suspicions that the advocates of the rapid expansion of genetic modification are motivated by commercial pressures and ready to ride roughshod over legitimate public fears?

Mr. Rooker: The short answer is that we are taking the regulation of those crops so seriously that the Health and Safety Executive is prosecuting two agricultural companies, Monsanto and Perry Field Holdings, following a routine inspection of a trial site at Rothwell on 5 June this year. The case will be heard on 17 February next year. The regulation of the science and the industry is taken very seriously.

Meat Hygiene

3. **Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours** (Workington): If he will make a statement on the promotion of meat hygiene in abattoirs. [62987]

10. **Mr. Peter L. Pike** (Burnley): If he will make a statement on the promotion of meat hygiene in abattoirs. [62994]

Mr. Rooker: The safety of food and consumer protection remain among the Government's highest priorities. We have therefore put in train a series of measures designed to raise hygiene standards in abattoirs and have instructed the Meat Hygiene Service to take rigorous enforcement action to ensure compliance with legislative requirements.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Are those in abattoirs who breach the regulations being prosecuted?

Mr. Rooker: The short answer is yes. If prosecution is required, it will take place—in fact, there have been 19 prosecutions since the middle of 1996. Each prosecution is known and open and they are all reported in the Meat Hygiene Service enforcement bulletin, a copy of which is placed in the Library every month. If hon. Members wish to be on the mailing list—as the hon. Member for Daventry (Mr. Boswell) is—they have only to write to my Department and they will be added to it.

Mr. Pike: Will my hon. Friend confirm that his Department is at present consulting with regard to the enforcement powers of meat hygiene inspectors? Will he confirm also that any intimidation of those inspectors is not acceptable and will not be tolerated?

Mr. Rooker: There are two issues involved in this matter. We do not need to consult about the powers of hygiene inspectors regarding the intimidation of public staff. The Meat Hygiene Service has been told—and the advice has been clarified—that, if there is verbal or physical intimidation of staff, it has the power to remove inspectors from the part of the plant concerned. That would effectively close the plant, so the service has that power. There have been two successful prosecutions this year regarding the abuse of meat hygiene staff. Those cases have been highlighted and one was the subject of an early-day motion in the House.

As regards inspectors' other powers, we are about to consult to give them greater control, particularly over hygiene in abattoirs as opposed to meat hygiene. That would allow quicker action to be taken regarding cleaning in abattoirs, abattoir walls and other structural issues. We could then take quicker action in the case of an unsatisfactory performance.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): Does the Minister agree that most members of the public regard abattoirs as a taboo subject? That makes it even more important for Members of Parliament to see at first hand how they

operate. For the avoidance of doubt, will the Minister tell the House how many abattoirs he has visited and when he next proposes to visit one?

Mr. Rooker: I have visited three cattle abattoirs and a sheep abattoir. Last Friday, I visited the pig abattoir that is the family business of the hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr. Gill), who is my Pair in the House.

Mr. Lembit Öpik (Montgomeryshire): Is the hon. Gentleman aware that the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food visited Welshpool market and was apprised of meat hygiene inspection issues? Is he further aware that many abattoir owners think that the cost of inspection is unnecessarily high? Will he make a commitment to re-examine those costs to find out whether savings can be made?

Mr. Rooker: We have no intention of overburdening abattoirs, particularly small owners and operators, but there is no opportunity for derogation within the EU guidelines. There is an EU requirement that abattoirs be visited and inspected. If there are allegations that we are being too onerous, we will consider them. As I have already said, if there are allegations that the same rules do not operate in the rest of the European Union, the evidence should be given to us and we will take the matter up with the Commission, which is responsible for checking abattoirs in the rest of the EU.

Rural Economy

4. **Ms Christine Russell** (City of Chester): What steps he has taken to promote sustainable rural development. [62988]

7. **Mr. Michael J. Foster** (Worcester): What measures have been taken to promote the rural economy. [62991]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The Government have provided a broad range of support for the rural economy since May 1997, including £112 million available for agriculture-related rural development projects under the objective 5b programme, an additional £50 million a year for rural transport, and aid—amounting to over £270 million—to support the livestock sector. Those measures are in addition to the support for agriculture under the common agricultural policy which is worth, on average, £3 billion a year.

Ms Russell: I am sure that my right hon. Friend is aware that a number of local authorities are doing their best to bolster the rural economy by innovative schemes such as grants to small rural businesses and village shops and grant aid for the re-utilisation of redundant farm buildings. I know that there is excellent joined-up government work between the Ministry and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions. My former planning authority has asked me what the relationship is between the review that my right hon. Friend announced last month into the long-term strategy for the rural economy and the rural White Paper, which I know is in preparation. Can my right hon. Friend help?

Mr. Brown: The two examinations are being conducted in parallel. The work between my Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is very important. We are working together on the joint White Paper for rural Britain. There are also areas of overlap between several schemes that are administered by my Department and the Department of my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister. We are trying to ensure that we get the maximum return for public expenditure.

Mr. Foster: Does my right hon. Friend agree that the new Countryside Agency will create a new and more integrated voice for rural England?

Mr. Brown: Yes, I agree with my hon. Friend. It is important that my Department and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions work closely on those projects and keep our objective clearly in mind. That objective is to reshape the CAP, so that it provides, among other things, a broader support mechanism for rural England, and to ensure that the work in my right hon. Friend's Department complements our projects.

Miss Anne McIntosh (Vale of York): Farmers in the Vale of York, particularly those in the uplands area, have benefited through objective 5b and the subsidies to which the right hon. Gentleman referred. Will he give them an assurance that they will continue to benefit—not perhaps to the same extent, but in large measure—particularly in the transitional phase, from the moneys that they have enjoyed in the past? They are still in the middle of a farming crisis and would appreciate such an assurance.

Mr. Brown: I agree with the thrust of the hon. Lady's question. It is my intention that the rural support measures that come under the first pillar of the CAP and what we hope will be a strongly developing second tier are specifically targeted at farm businesses. Small and medium businesses are particularly at the forefront of my mind. They are of enormous importance to the rural economy, and the hon. Lady is right to make her point.

Mr. Patrick Nicholls (Teignbridge): Does the right hon. Gentleman recall that his colleague the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) has devoted all his energy in this, his first and last Parliament, to abolishing fox hunting, the effect of which would be the loss of 16,000 jobs in the rural economy and the removal from that economy of something in the region of a quarter of a billion pounds? Does not the fact that the right hon. Gentleman and his right hon. and hon. Friends will be trooping through the Lobbies to abolish fox hunting at the next opportunity show that class hatred and urban intolerance are every bit as prevalent under new Labour as they were under old Labour?

Mr. Brown: I do not care very much for class issues. It is what a person is that counts, not what his ancestors did. As for fox hunting, I shall vote to abolish it if the opportunity arises. The idea that the Home Office is currently considering—that of balloting on the issue, county by county—is worthy of exploration, and we shall see what the outcome of that is.

The hon. Gentleman asked whether I understood the impact of abolition on the rural economy. Of course I do. It was implicit in the answer that I gave the hon. Member

for Vale of York (Miss McIntosh) that not only do I understand the impact but the Government are trying to do something about it.

Beef on the Bone

5. **Mr. John Greenway** (Ryedale): When he expects to end the ban on beef on the bone. [62989]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): I am afraid that I am not going to be able to give the hon. Gentleman the reply that he is probably hoping for, so he will have to be content with this one. I am currently awaiting advice from the chief medical officer. When I receive that advice, I shall give it full and urgent consideration in consultation with my ministerial colleagues, and make an announcement as soon as possible. I am afraid that that is the best I can do for the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Greenway: In the same spirit of good will, may I first thank the right hon. Gentleman on behalf of Ryedale beef producers for his efforts in getting the beef export ban lifted? We appreciate what a difficult task that was. I suspect that, had he been able to do so, he would have liked to give me the answer that I was hoping for. Notwithstanding that, does he recognise that the continuation of the ban of beef on the bone is not helping in the task of persuading European consumers to choose to buy British beef, and that consumers in Britain simply want the opportunity to choose to buy not just British beef but British beef on the bone?

Mr. Brown: Once the date-based export scheme is up and running, the beef that we will be able to sell in Europe is deboned beef. It is that beef which is specifically covered by the scheme arising from the agreement made at Florence. As for the domestic market, surely the most important thing is consumer confidence. As I have said before, I never expected the domestic beef-on-the-bone ban to endure for ever—it was not intended to do so. However, when it is lifted—this is the source of the disagreement—it must be on the basis of medical advice, not on the basis of political decision making.

Mr. Eric Martlew (Carlisle): I look forward to the beef-on-the-bone ban being lifted, but may I draw my right hon. Friend's attention to a wholly unjustified ban, namely the ban on dairy products, mainly by some countries in the middle east? That ban was a major factor in the loss of 40 jobs in my constituency last week. Will he make urgent representations to those countries to have that ban lifted?

Mr. Brown: I understand that the particular country to which my hon. Friend refers is Saudi Arabia. We are making urgent representations to that country on that matter.

Mr. Charles Kennedy (Ross, Skye and Inverness, West): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, as and when he receives satisfactory reports and is able to bring to the House the necessary measures to lift the ban on beef on the bone, there will undoubtedly be all-party support for such a move, in a way that there certainly was not for the imposition of the ban, even though there was a hint of it when the former Conservative Minister supported it—something that those currently on the Opposition Front Bench like to forget? As and when the ban is lifted, will the right hon. Gentleman undertake to publish a breakdown of the local authority and court costs to the public purse of the prosecutions achieved or just pursued, so that we can put into not only a political but a financial context just what a farce this entire ban has been?

Mr. Brown: I cannot accept the thrust of the hon. Gentleman's question. It is important that regulations pertaining to food safety and food standards are enforced. I cannot enforce just the ones with which the hon. Gentleman agrees and turn a blind eye to those with which he does not agree. He may discover the information that he requires by tabling a parliamentary question; there are no secrets in this matter. While the ban is imposed, my Department is obliged to enforce it.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud): My right hon. Friend is absolutely right to insist on medical reasons for lifting the beef-on-the-bone ban. That is the only way in which foreign customers will be encouraged to buy British beef. In the meantime, will he ensure that EU inspectors are able to see the different means by which we are able to export, so that exports can be reinstated as soon as possible?

Mr. Brown: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. The date-based export scheme is of course subject to a Commission inspection. In bilateral talks with different Agriculture Ministers in different countries in order to talk them through what the Government are doing not only to get the scheme up and running but to protect public health in this country, I have invited Ministers or their officials not only to come to this country but to join technical discussions with my Department's officials. We have absolutely nothing to hide. The date-based export scheme will put on international markets beef that is among some of the safest in the world.

Mr. James Paice (South-East Cambridgeshire): Will the Minister confirm that the ban on the export of tallow was lifted at the Florence summit, subject only to inspections by the Commission? Is he aware that those inspections have still not taken place—some two years later? What will he do to make absolutely sure that inspections necessary for lifting the export ban occur, so that a reasonable timetable can be met for re-exporting the high-quality beef, which he rightly praises?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is right to say that questions relating to tallow are still under discussion with the Commission. We are proceeding on a pretty set timetable for the date-based export scheme. I am determined that it will be up and running by the spring. From discussions that my officials have had with the Commission, we have no reason at all to believe that there will be any delay in the Commission inspection, which, as he rightly points out, is crucial to getting the scheme up and running. There is no need for any further political clearance; the issue does not have to go back to the Council of Ministers—and I am pleased about that. However, it is necessary that the Commission reports that

the scheme is up and running, as we said it would be. I am certain that we can get through the inspection, although, of course, the matter must not be taken lightly.

Mr. Bob Blizzard (Waveney): Were not the only alternatives to the swift and decisive action that the Government took in banning beef on the bone either to try to sweep the matter under the carpet or to let it drift on, week after week, inviting speculation about the safety of beef on the bone, and thereby undermining confidence in the entire beef industry—in fact, the sort of fiasco that occurred under the previous Government, which is being revealed in the BSE inquiry? Did not such swift and decisive action help us achieve the removal of the worldwide ban on British beef?

Mr. Brown: Having seen the papers that were put in front of my predecessor before he made his decision to impose the beef-on-the-bone ban, I do not think that he had very much choice in the matter. I think that the decision was right. The Government are absolutely determined to put the safety of the public at the forefront of decision making in this area. It was never intended that the ban would be for ever. When it is raised, it will be as a result of medical advice and not political decision making.

Food Safety

6. **Mr. Richard Spring** (West Suffolk): If he will make an assessment of existing UK food safety legislation. [62990]

8. **Angela Smith** (Basildon): If he will make a statement on the measures he is taking to promote the safety of food. [62992]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): We have taken a range of measures to promote food safety across the food chain and keep all food safety controls under general review. We are also fully committed to establishing a food standards agency as soon as possible.

Mr. Spring: Does the Minister agree that, for British food safety, it is absurd that EU-imposed rules on antibiotics do not to apply to food imported into this country? Does he accept that that is bad not only for our farmers, who are already in a crisis, but for our consumers, and that there is a potentially dangerous situation ahead? What does he propose to do about that situation?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman's question has two parts. On the part with which I disagree, I do not think that the EU decision is bad for consumers because, by having a European Union wide ban, European consumers' exposure is dramatically diminished.

On the question whether the ban is bad for producers, the hon. Gentleman is on to a much better point; I made that point myself at the Council of Ministers on Monday, when the matter was discussed. Obviously, from a producer's point of view, it does seem unfair—and certainly the market is not even—if products that can be used in the rest of the world are not allowed to be used in the European Union. I have asked that the Commission take up that point and come back to the Council of Ministers with a response to it. The further scientific investigations that the Commission has reported to the Council of Ministers offer a way forward on what I accept is an important point.

Angela Smith: Although I warmly welcome the Minister's comments on the food standards agency—which I hope will be set up very soon—I remind him that consumers and retailers alike regard it as crucial to have confidence in food safety. What action does he feel able to take in, one hopes, the very short term, while we are awaiting the food safety agency, to reassure the public and retailers?

Mr. Brown: I can do better than that. The Government remain committed to setting up the food standards agency, following the proposals outlined in the White Paper "The Food Standards Agency: A Force for Change". We have said that, should additional parliamentary time become available—here we are slightly in the hands of the Opposition, both here and in another place—we hope to make progress on the necessary legislation in the present Session. In the meantime, the House will want to know that, following discussions with colleagues today, I can announce that we shall publish the food standards agency Bill in draft, for public consultation, in January 1999. The draft Bill will be available for pre-legislative scrutiny by the House. At the same time, we intend to publish a document for consultation on the Government's proposals for financing the additional costs of the agency.

Mr. Paul Tyler (North Cornwall): As the Minister tucks into his Christmas dinner, I am sure that he will be aware that, year on year, the incidence of food poisoning at this season has increased. I hope that he will take note of that. May I, in that context, welcome very warmly indeed the announcement that he has just made? As he will be aware from experience in his former capacity and his present capacity, the Liberal Democrats have been urging that the food standards agency be established as quickly possible, to restore confidence in British food.

I also very much welcome the announcement that the Minister has made of the procedure that he and his colleagues intend to follow. That will be very helpful. However, I draw his attention to the fact that it seems that the legislative logjam in the other place has now been removed, and that the kamikaze behaviour of some Conservative peers seems to have ended. In that context, he has my full support for placing the food standards agency at the head of the queue to be legislated for in this Session.

Mr. Brown: The agency is one of the Government's two priorities for legislation, should extra legislative time become available. In any event, I hope that the announcement that I have made today about the Bill's early availability and the potential for pre-legislative scrutiny—perhaps a Select Committee procedure here in the House—will speed the passage of the legislation through the House when we move to First and Second Reading. I hope that it will be possible to proceed on a broadly bipartisan basis, because this is an important public protection measure.

Mrs. Gwyneth Dunwoody (Crewe and Nantwich): In the meantime, would my right hon. Friend like to spend

some of his money, and perhaps some of that of the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, on a straightforward but energetic publicity campaign, teaching both men and women how to cook? Some of the simple rules of hygiene might protect a lot of the people who get themselves into trouble at present.

Mr. Brown: I agree with the thrust of my hon. Friend's question about public hygiene and ensuring that simple, easily understood information relating to public hygiene is available. I shall act on her suggestion.

Mr. Tim Yeo (South Suffolk): Notwithstanding the Minister's answer to my hon. Friend, does it not remain true that the latest ban on antibiotics is only an empty gesture in terms of food safety, because consumers will continue to buy imported and unlabelled food from countries where those drugs have not been banned? Is it not the case, as I think that he has now acknowledged, that, unless he and the other Ministers on the European Council act quickly, the decision represents further proof that they do not really care about how far British poultry and pig farmers are placed at a disadvantage? It is only through campaigns such as the Opposition's "fair deal for farmers" and the *Yorkshire Post*'s "save our farmers" that anyone is sticking up for the British farmer.

Mr. Brown: I meet the groups that lobby on behalf of the British farmer and I am trying to work co-operatively with them. The suggestion that the hon. Gentleman has condemned was made to me and other Ministers by two all-party Select Committees. The idea that I am doing something that is discordant with the wishes of the House is just wrong.

The hon. Gentleman is on to a good point on the issue of competition, on which I responded to the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Mr. Spring) earlier. I do not accept what he says about public health. The EU-wide ban will substantially diminish the exposure of European peoples to antibiotics because much of the food that we eat is of EU origin.

Common Agricultural Policy

9. **Ms Chris McCafferty** (Calder Valley): If he will make a statement on the time scale for reform of the common agricultural policy. [62993]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): On 23 and 24 November, the Agriculture Council issued a report to the Vienna European Council which identified the main outstanding issues of the CAP reform proposals and expressed its determination to reach conclusions on the package as a whole by March 1999.

Ms McCafferty: I am sure that my right hon. Friend agrees that the Agenda 2000 proposals for reform of the CAP will bring economic benefits and will be good news for consumers in the United Kingdom. Would my right hon. Friend care to comment on the overall impact that reform of the CAP will have on UK consumers?

Mr. Brown: There will be substantial benefits for consumers if we are able to achieve even the Commission's package. Further down the line, there are substantial benefits for taxpayers as well. The benefits for consumers will derive from cheaper food and the benefits for the taxpayers will derive from a diminished subsidy regime.

Mr. Michael Jack (Fylde): One of the changes to the CAP that the Minister may well be considering is new requirements for record keeping and identification of sheep. Is he aware that, in the north-west of England, there is great concern about the speed with which he wishes to embrace the proposals, especially as sheep producers have already agreed to a voluntary arrangement to improve the identification and marking of sheep? Will the Minister consider carefully the representations from the National Farmers Union in the north-west on that matter? What room for manoeuvre is there to make the new requirements compatible with the United Kingdom sheep industry?

Mr. Brown: I always consider representations from the NFU carefully. I am keen to establish a good working relationship with it and others who represent the interests of the farming community, the food industry and the broader interests of rural Britain. It is clear that the right hon. Gentleman is not following the Agenda 2000 discussions quite so closely as I thought that he was, because the sheep regime is outside the scope of the Agenda 2000 proposals.

Food Marketing

11. **Dr. Brian Iddon** (Bolton, South-East): What measures his Department is taking to improve the marketing of food to the benefit of both producer and consumer. [62995]

The Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Jeff Rooker): The Department pursues a number of measures to improve marketing both for producers and for consumers. On 29 November—the first day of the Smithfield show—we announced a joint initiative with the National Farmers Union to encourage collaborative marketing among producers.

Dr. Iddon: My family have always been involved in the food production industry so I know that the producers often take the largest risk in the food production chain yet take out one of the smallest commensurate profits. What is my hon. Friend doing to redress that balance?

Mr. Rooker: My hon. Friend is right. That is why the collaborative marketing approach, which does not force producers into co-ops but enables them to produce on a small scale while still supplying the large suppliers on a large scale, is best. They can then produce both scale and quality. Of course, the big buyers want consistency of supply. Small producers cannot always provide that on their own, but they can do so in collaboration with other producers. We want to encourage the NFU and other producer groups to go down that route. My hon. Friend is right about who takes the biggest snatch in the food chain.

Mr. Tim Boswell (Daventry): Does the Minister agree that it is galling if producers co-operate in the interests of the highest food standards and marketing development, yet imports enter the country and readily circulate without

the benefit of the precautions and high standards of British producers? Is it not important that the Minister should examine the entire supply chain from plough to plate, to try to ensure that it operates with maximum openness and in the interests of British consumers as well as British farmers?

Mr. Rooker: The hon. Gentleman is right. We want to build on the assurances that we received recently from the British Retail Consortium regarding its members. That is a major step forward and will help to ensure that British producers who, for example, maintain much higher animal welfare standards than our European partners, do not suffer because of that. We must find a mechanism for our buyers to force or encourage our European competitors to operate to the same high standards that we operate in this country.

Beef Export Ban

12. **Mr. Ben Chapman** (Wirral, South): What steps he is taking to end the export ban on beef. [62996]

The Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (Mr. Nick Brown): The Commission decision providing for exports of deboned beef from the whole of the United Kingdom under the date-based export scheme—DBES—was adopted on 25 November. That was a major breakthrough reflecting months of dialogue within the European Commission and with our European partners.

We are now pressing ahead with arrangements to implement the scheme. We issued plans for the operation of the scheme on 14 December, seeking views from the industry. For hon. Members who are interested, I have placed a copy in the Library.

Mr. Chapman: The decision to lift the ban was indeed important and welcome, but it does not of itself put money into beef producers' pockets. In addition to the DBES, there is a need to restore confidence in overseas markets generally, and for our exporters to re-establish themselves in those markets. That will take time. What plans does my right hon. Friend have to help British beef producers re-establish themselves, and when does he expect substantial beef exports to take place?

Mr. Brown: My hon. Friend is right in his analysis of the situation. Officials in my Department and Ministers are working closely with representatives of the beef industry and in particular those who want to come into the date-based export scheme as suppliers or producers, to make sure that we get the scheme up and running as soon as possible. I anticipate that we will be able to start exporting deboned beef by the spring of next year. Markets will take time to grow, but it is a premium product for which we can find a place in international markets early on. The Government will stand behind producers and exporters to help them to regain market share.

Mr. William Thompson (West Tyrone): How soon after the lifting of the ban on beef on the bone in the United Kingdom does the Minister expect it to be lifted in Europe, so that exports of such beef to Europe can begin?

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is speaking about two separate schemes. The ban in the United Kingdom is a domestic ban, which was put in place for consumer protection reasons. Discussions are going on in the European Union about Europe-wide specified risk material regulations. Separately, there will be continuing discussions with our partners about the export of boned, rather than deboned, beef. I am afraid that, because of the terms of the Florence agreement, an announcement on that matter is still some way away. I do not want to raise the hon. Gentleman's hopes by implying that it might be early.

Mr. Owen Paterson (North Shropshire): Further to the Minister's reply, there is a direct link. The new conditions require that meat companies dedicate whole abattoirs entirely to the export business. The most lucrative business before the ban was that of beef on the bone for whole roasts to Europe's highest-quality restaurants and meat distributors. I do not know of a single meat business that is prepared to commit itself to dedicate an entire abattoir until the beef-on-the-bone ban is lifted.

Mr. Brown: The hon. Gentleman is wrong. After discussions with the industry, we are certain that we shall be able to get producers and abattoir operators into the scheme so, under the terms of the agreement, a volume of deboned beef will be available for export. The hon. Gentleman's question goes wider than the answer that I have just given and criticises the initial terms of the Florence agreement. All that I can say on that is that it was made by his Government.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

The Attorney-General was asked—

Sentencing

30. **Mr. Tim Collins** (Westmorland and Lonsdale): How many unduly lenient sentences he has sought leave to refer to the Court of Appeal since 1 May 1997; and what has been the outcome of such referrals. [63015]

The Attorney-General (Mr. John Morris): Since 1 May 1997, leave has been sought in respect of 137 offenders; 101 applications have been heard; leave was granted in 97 applications; and the sentence was increased in 84, which is 83.2 per cent. of references which have been heard.

Mr. Collins: I am delighted to hear that the new Government are continuing to use that power granted by the previous Government. Does the Attorney-General now regret the fact that the Labour party in opposition opposed the introduction of that power?

The Attorney-General: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right; I am continuing on the same basis that my predecessors submitted cases to the Court of Appeal. The hon. Gentleman was not in the House when the matter was debated. There was a great deal of concern, not confined to one party alone but apparent also among many of the judiciary, about the proposal. The basis of the fears was that individuals would be placed in double jeopardy. Fortunately, the courts have interpreted the

legislation to take account of double jeopardy, and that is not in the legislation. In the circumstances, I am more than content that the machinery is working properly.

Mr. Geraint Davies (Croydon, Central): I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for the way in which he refers cases for reconsideration, in particular those so serious or appalling that they generate widespread public concern. I am confident that the Court of Appeal will look closely at such cases. The people of Croydon are particularly grateful for cases of local concern which have been referred.

The Attorney-General: I fully understand my hon. Friend's concern about a local case which caused great anxiety. A petition was submitted and there was a great deal of press interest. I know the concerns of many in many localities when sentences are out of line with guidelines and the practice of the courts. In those instances, it is important to maintain public confidence and to refer cases, which are few against the total number—about 0.5 per cent.—to the Court of Appeal to ensure that public confidence is maintained.

32. **Mr. Paul Flynn** (Newport, West): What new proposals he has to discourage apparently lenient sentences. [63018]

The Attorney-General: The Government are actively considering how best to implement our manifesto commitment to extend my powers to refer cases to the Court of Appeal for review when it appears to me that the sentence is unduly lenient. The Government hope to be able to announce proposals early next year.

Mr. Flynn: Does my right hon. and learned Friend recall a recent case where a driver, who demolished a wall while being three times over the breathalyser limit, escaped without fine or ban; another case in which a defendant, who was accused of a £1 million mortgage fraud, was excused a retrial on the ground that he was suffering stress; and a third case in which a driver, who admitted to being responsible for an accident in which a young woman was injured and will probably lose her eyesight, suffered no prosecution, ban or penalty points and was advised to take extra driving lessons? Is it not extraordinary that, in those three cases, the people involved were all High Court judges? Is there one rule for judges and another for the rest of us?

The Attorney-General: I can assure my hon. Friend that there is the same rule, and the rule of law prevails for each and every one, from the highest to the lowest. Any decision that I have to take is no less fair for the highest than for someone who may, apparently, be less important in society. Everyone is treated in exactly the same way.

Mr. Elfyn Llwyd (Meirionnydd Nant Conwy): Does the Attorney-General agree that there might be a case for better instruction of judges in sentencing principles and guidelines?

The Attorney-General: As a rather long-established recorder until fairly recently, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that potential judges, assistant recorders, recorders and judges attend courses in order to ensure cross-fertilisation of knowledge, experience and practice. Over the years, the Court of Appeal has issued a substantial number of guidelines which have assisted judges in the difficult task of sentencing.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): In pursuing the same line as the hon. Member for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn), may I ask the Attorney-General to speculate on whether judges are given proper instruction in the declaration of their interests?

The Attorney-General: I cannot comment on a matter that I understand is sub judice at the moment. As regards the decision made today, it would not be right for me to do so.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): When a prosecution has been stayed or a trial discontinued because the defendant was apparently suffering from an incurable disease such as Alzheimer's, but he then makes a miraculous recovery, is there not a good case for the prosecution to revisit that case and bring it back to trial?

The Attorney-General: That can always be considered if there is a change in the legislative position. However, it is not the position now and I have to administer the law as it stands.

Human Rights Act

33. **Mr. Alan Clark** (Kensington and Chelsea): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Home Affairs concerning declarations of incompatibility under the Human Rights Act 1998. [63019]

The Solicitor-General (Mr. Ross Cranston): The contents of the Human Rights Act were discussed extensively among Ministers in the preparation of the Government's White Paper, in the process of drafting the Bill and during debates in Parliament. The provisions relating to declarations of incompatibility, although complex, are an important and central part of the legislation. Ministers are satisfied with the Act and in particular with the provisions relating to declarations of incompatibility.

Mr. Clark: That does not really take the matter any further. One of the primary functions of the Attorney-General is to ensure that Ministers and the Government stay within the law. The Home Secretary only recently told the House that a declaration of incompatibility does not affect the validity, continuing operation or enforcement of the provision in respect of which it is given and is not binding on the parties to the proceedings in which it is made. Leaving aside the implicit contradiction between two senior Ministers, what advice would the Solicitor-General give to successful or potential litigants?

The Solicitor-General: This country has been an adherent to the European convention on human rights since 1951. All Governments have complied with their international obligations. The legislation that they have introduced has in their view been compliant with the law. Occasionally, courts may decide that there is non-compliance and in future there may be declarations

of incompatibility under the provision but, on the whole, we take the view—as did the Government in which the right hon. Gentleman served—that we comply with our international obligations and so does our legislation.

Sir Nicholas Lyell (North–East Bedfordshire): Do the Solicitor-General and the Attorney-General realise that there is a serious problem and unfinished business under the Human Rights Act 1998? Where the courts have declared our law to be incompatible with the convention, the Act provides under section 4(6) that the law none the less remains the same until it is changed by Parliament. However, supposing the Government disagree with the House of Lords and wish the matter to be resolved by Strasbourg so that our law is not out of kilter with that which applies in the rest of the Council of Europe. What would happen then? Which law would apply? Would it be the law before the ruling of the court or after the ruling of the court? Technically, it would be the law that applied before the ruling but, unless the Government make their position clear, neither the citizen nor our courts will know where they stand.

We suggested a mechanism so that citizens and courts would know whether the Government would take the matter on to Strasbourg or force the other party to take it on to Strasbourg. Will the law officers and the Home Secretary find a sensible mechanism to resolve that serious potential problem, and will they or the Home Secretary announce it to the House?

The Solicitor–General: That section was a neat solution to the problem of parliamentary sovereignty—it retains parliamentary sovereignty. The courts cannot strike down legislation under section 4. Obviously, we are still obliged to comply with our international obligations under the convention, and we shall do so.

Rights of Audience

34. **Miss Anne McIntosh** (Vale of York): What representations he has received on the extension of the rights of audience of barristers and solicitors employed by the Crown Prosecution Service. [63021]

The Attorney-General: The Solicitor-General and I have discussed the matter with the Director of Public Prosecutions, others in the Crown Prosecution Service and members of both professions. My noble and learned Friend the Lord Chancellor has recently introduced in the other place a Bill that will reform rights of audience and permit Crown Prosecution Service lawyers to exercise full rights of audience in the higher courts. I support his proposals and welcome the introduction of his Bill.

Miss McIntosh: I am grateful for that reply. Has the right hon. and learned Gentleman considered extending the same rights of audience that he has just explained to the House to in-house barristers working for companies in parallel with the Crown Prosecution Service, so that they can enjoy the same rights of audience under the Bill?

The Attorney–General: Before the Bill comes into effect—if it is approved by both Houses—the position of in-house barristers is subject to the machinery under the Courts and Legal Services Act 1990. The matter is being considered, and I hope that an early decision will be made.

Mr. John Burnett (Torridge and West Devon): Does the Attorney-General really believe that having the state as both prosecutor and defender is in the interests of a fair and independent criminal justice system?

The Attorney–General: I do not think that there is any difficulty. The state has been the paymaster of the prosecution from time immemorial. Since a Labour Government in the 1940s set up the legal aid system, the state has also been the paymaster of the independent Bar and solicitors who have appeared in court on behalf of defendants. I see no difficulty in extending that principle if it becomes appropriate.

Crown Prosecution Service

35. **Mr. John Bercow** (Buckingham): If he will make a statement on his assessment of the effectiveness of the Crown Prosecution Service. [63023]

The Attorney-General: Sir Iain Glidewell's report on the Crown Prosecution Service made a number of recommendations aimed at improving the effectiveness of the CPS. On 30 November, I placed in the Library of the House a chart setting out the action that the CPS has taken to consider and implement those recommendations. I am pleased with the progress that the CPS is making under its new Director of Public Prosecutions and chief executive. I am confident that that provides a sound basis for the CPS to proceed as a national but decentralised service with effect from April 1999, obtaining maximum benefit from the "fresh start" advocated in the Glidewell report.

Mr. Bercow: I thank the Attorney-General for that helpful reply. Is it not crucial to improved performance by the Crown Prosecution Service that the administrative support units that help to prepare cases for it are led and guided by the highest-calibre lawyers and police officers? Should not the emphasis of their work be on the expeditious handling of paperwork and on ensuring that they get it right the first time? What specific measures are being taken to facilitate that important objective?

The Attorney–General: I am happy to tell the House that, as regards the necessary priorities, the hon. Gentleman has got it right too. What he has described was one of the fundamental recommendations of the Glidewell report that is now being considered. I hope to report to the House later on the new unit appropriate for ensuring that prosecutions are handled effectively. As a major step in that direction, the advertisement has now gone out for the appointment of chief Crown prosecutors in each area. That is an important plank in building the type of system that both the hon. Gentleman and I agree is necessary.

Iraq

3.30 pm

The Prime Minister (Mr. Tony Blair): With permission, I will make a statement on Iraq.

Yesterday, I authorised the participation of British forces in a substantial US-UK military strike against targets in Iraq. As the House knows, this attack began last night, to maximise surprise through the use of sea-launched cruise missiles and precision bombing by navy-based manned aircraft. The operation is now continuing and, as I speak, British Tornado aircraft are engaged in action. I spoke to their commander last night and congratulated him on the bravery and professionalism of his forces. I know that the whole House will join with me in wishing them well as they risk their lives to help ensure peace and stability in the middle east and more widely. We are proud of them.

The objectives of this military operation are clear and simple: to degrade the ability of Saddam Hussein to build and use weapons of mass destruction, including command and control and delivery systems, and to diminish the threat that Saddam Hussein poses to his neighbours by weakening his military capability.

Those objectives are achievable and the action is proportionate to the serious dangers Saddam Hussein poses to his immediate neighbours, the middle east region and the international community more widely. The targets, throughout Iraq, have been very carefully selected to reflect these objectives. We are taking every possible care to avoid civilian casualties or damage to ordinary civilian infrastructure.

The House will forgive me, I hope, if I say no more about operational details at this stage. To go further could endanger the lives of those involved. However, first reports from last night's operations suggest that they were successful and inflicted the kind of military damage we were seeking.

When I spoke to the House on 16 November, after we and the Americans had stayed our hand because of a written Iraqi promise of full co-operation with the UN weapons inspectors, I set out in some detail why we had come to the brink of military action. The House, I hope, will forgive me if I once again set current events in their proper context, because it is vital that people understand that the threat from Saddam is not theoretical—it is real.

Our policy has always been to seek genuine Iraqi compliance with the demands of the Security Council. After the Gulf war had revealed the extent of Saddam's arsenal, Iraq agreed in April 1991 to accept the destruction of all its weapons of mass destruction and not to develop such weapons in the future. Iraq also agreed to a special commission to monitor and oversee the process. That was the price that Iraq was made to pay for the cessation of hostilities. The capability that Saddam had at the outset of the Gulf war included a nuclear weapons programme only two years away from producing an effective bomb; long-range missile stocks able to threaten all his neighbours; a chemical weapons arsenal of huge proportions, which he had already used on the Iranians in the 10-year war that he started on Iran, and on his own people; and a biological weapons programme capable of producing enough deadly toxins to destroy the population of the globe several times over.

It was then expected that the special commission, together with the International Atomic Energy Agency, would complete this process in a few months, but it was not to be. What no one fully foresaw at that time was the huge effort that Iraq would put into blocking it. The inspectors have been constantly harassed, threatened, deceived and lied to. A special and elaborate mechanism to conceal Iraqi capability was put in place involving organisations close to Saddam, in particular his Special Republican Guard.

Despite that, the United Nations Special Commission achieved a huge amount, particularly after the defection of Saddam Hussein's son-in-law, later murdered by Saddam. UNSCOM destroyed, for example, more than 38,000 chemical weapons munitions, 48 Scud missiles and a biological weapons factory designed to produce up to 50,000 litres of anthrax, botulism toxin and other deadly agents. But much—too much—remains unaccounted for. Iraq has consistently sought to frustrate attempts to look at the records and destroy the remaining capability—and let us again be clear: Saddam still has capability in this area, not least to develop more weapons in the future. Let me give just one example: more than 610 tonnes of precursor chemicals for the nerve gas VX have not yet been found or accounted for.

Meanwhile, Saddam's conventional military capabilities remain at a very high level. He has more than 1 million men under arms, including 75,000 in the Republican Guard and 15,000 members of the Special Republican Guard. Saddam attaches importance to only one thing: his ability to dominate his people and his neighbours by military force. He wants to retain all the weapons that he can, including weapons of mass destruction. He has used them before, and I am in no doubt of his readiness to use them again if he has any opportunity. His brutality and ruthlessness are too well documented for there to be any doubt of that. The UN special rapporteur on human rights issued a new report on Iraq in October; it bears studying. He documented massive and extremely grave violations of human rights, including the widespread and systematic use of torture, a new policy of penal mutilation and amputations introduced by Saddam's son, Uday, and innumerable and illegal political executions.

After the full extent of the weapons programme was uncovered in 1996 and early 1997, Saddam began to obstruct in real earnest. He cast doubt on the independence of the inspectors. He sought to exclude US and British members of UNSCOM. He sought to declare certain sites out of bounds, on the ground that they were personal palaces. That led to a series of crises with the Security Council and the international community, and a recurring threat of force, first in October 1997—when he eventually backed down—and then in February this year. The House will recall that that was eventually resolved by the UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, going to Baghdad and concluding a binding memorandum of understanding with the Iraqis. In it, Saddam undertook to co-operate fully with UNSCOM and the IAEA, and confirmed that that meant

"immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access in conformity with Security Council Resolutions."

But the pattern continued. Then Saddam broke altogether the agreement with Kofi Annan. In August he suspended co-operation, and on 31 October he ended it. That was why, on 14 November, I gave authority for

British forces to participate in a United States-United Kingdom strike against Iraq, which, as we know, was averted only by another offer from Saddam. The Iraqis again agreed, in terms that spoke of a

"clear and unconditional decision of the Iraqi government to resume cooperation with UNSCOM and the IAEA".

They said:

"UNSCOM and the IAEA could immediately resume all their activities according to the relevant Resolutions of the Security Council."

I remind the House that those resolutions call on Iraq to comply unconditionally with the demands of the Security Council to give up all weapons of mass destruction, and to co-operate fully with UNSCOM and the IAEA. Resolution 707 of 15 August 1991, for example, passed after the first evidence of Iraqi non-compliance, demanded that Iraq should

"provide full, final and complete disclosure . . . of aspects of its programmes to develop weapons of mass destruction",

and that it should allow UNSCOM and the IAEA

"immediate, unconditional and unrestricted access to any and all areas, facilities, equipment, records, and means of transportation which they wish to inspect".

There were some who thought that we should have taken military action on 14 November. But, despite our severe doubts, we went that extra mile. We gave Saddam that last chance. Even at the risk to our own credibility, we were determined to avoid, if we responsibly could, the use of force. At the same time, we and the Americans also gave the clearest possible warning that, should Saddam break his word once more, there would be no further warnings or diplomatic arguments. I told the House on 16 November that, if he again obstructed the work of the inspectors, we would strike. No warnings. No wrangling. No negotiation. No last-minute letters.

President Clinton also set out what Saddam had to do: allow unfettered access for UNSCOM and the IAEA and abide by all the relevant Security Council resolutions; otherwise, he said, the US stood ready to act without further warning.

Saddam Hussein is a man to whom a last chance to do right is just a further opportunity to do wrong. He is blind to reason. We were not unconscious of that, but we wanted to show for our part that reason, not vengeance, motivated us. So, acting on that promise of unconditional access, Richard Butler was asked to put his inspectors back in immediately and carry out the full range of his tasks, and then to report back to the Security Council. He said that he would do so within a month. On Monday, a month later, he did so. That report was clear and damning. Copies were placed in the House yesterday. Butler summarises UNSCOM's experiences: limited co-operation in some areas, yes, but otherwise a clear pattern of obstruction—over documents, access to Iraqi personnel and, above all, the surprise inspections of suspect sites so vital to UNSCOM's completion of its task. Co-operation, as the report says, has indeed been less good in some areas even than in the difficult times of the past.

The evidence is clear, as set out by Butler. Important and relevant documents have not been handed over. Their existence has even been denied in many cases, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. The documents are vital because they would reveal how many weapons Iraq had and has and where they are or may be located. We know that the Iraqis have deliberately destroyed as many of these documents as they can, including in the second half of this November as UNSCOM was resuming its work.

The Iraqis have also blocked legitimate inspections including one to the Ba'ath party headquarters. This visit was not an idle provocation, but because there was reliable evidence of relevant material at that site. In another case, an inspection of the former headquarters of the Special Security Organisation was eventually allowed to go ahead, but only after the building had been emptied, not only of any relevant material, but of its furniture and all equipment of any kind.

Butler's conclusion is clear and unequivocal:

"in the light of this experience, that is, the absence of full cooperation by Iraq, it must regrettably be recorded again that the Commission is not able to conduct the substantive disarmament work mandated to it by the Security Council and, thus, to give the Council the assurances it requires with respect to Iraq's prohibited weapons programmes."

Anyone who has followed at all the pattern of events in Iraq in recent years must come to the same inescapable conclusion. Whatever the arguments about particular incidents, Saddam's attitude to the inspectors and their work cannot remotely be described as full co-operation. It has instead been as much deliberate obstruction as he thought he could get away with. Moreover, he has also consistently sought in the past 18 months to use this obstruction deliberately to try to blackmail the international community into lifting sanctions—a step which we support when he has complied with his obligations but which is quite unacceptable before he has done so, and while the threat remains.

In those circumstances, we had a stark choice. Either we could let this process continue further, with UNSCOM more and more emasculated, including its monitoring capability, Saddam correspondingly free to pursue his weapon-making ambitions, and this one-sided, unjustified bargaining over sanctions continuing, or, having tried every possible diplomatic avenue and shown endless patience despite all Saddam's deception, we could decide that, if UNSCOM could not do its work, we should tackle Saddam's remaining capability through direct action of our own. In the circumstances, there was only one responsible choice to make.

We are acting now because Butler's report—delivered on time—was so clear and because, if we were going to act, it was obviously better that we should do so without giving Saddam unnecessary time to prepare his defences and disperse whatever he could to new locations. In particular, we were immensely sensitive to the imminence of Ramadan and very reluctant to have to start a military campaign during Ramadan, out of our respect for Muslim sentiments. On the other hand, waiting until after Ramadan would have given Saddam a month to prepare. It would have been highly risky in military terms and likely to reduce significantly the effect of our attacks.

I want to deal with one thing straight on. There are suggestions that the timing of military action is somehow linked to the internal affairs of the United States. I refute this entirely. I have no doubt at all that action is fully justified now. That is my own strong, personal view. I know that President Clinton reached the same conclusion for the same reasons. Had he acted differently, out of regard to internal matters of US politics, that would have

[The Prime Minister]

been a dereliction of his duty as President of the United States. Instead, not for the first time, he has shown the courage to do the right thing, and he has my full support.

Other questions arise about this military operation. Let me deal with them as briefly as I can. Is it a specific objective to remove Saddam Hussein? The answer is: it cannot be. No one would be better pleased if his evil regime disappeared as a direct or indirect result of our action, but our military objectives are precisely those that we have set out. Even if there were legal authority to do so, removing Saddam through military action would require the insertion of ground troops on a massive scale—hundreds of thousands, as the British Chief of the Defence Staff, Sir Charles Guthrie, made clear this morning. Even then, there would be no absolute guarantee of success. I cannot make that commitment responsibly.

What will happen once the military operation is over? The answer to that depends at least as much on Saddam as it does on us. I hope that he will finally come to his senses and recognise that the only way to find support in the international community and light at the end of the tunnel is full compliance with the Security Council's requirements. UNSCOM must remain ready to resume its work and to accomplish the task set by the Security Council and agreed to by the Iraqis.

Alternatively, if, as is likely, Saddam will not see reason, then after this military operation is concluded, we will ensure that Saddam's weakened military capability cannot be rebuilt and that the threat he poses is fully contained. We have the ability to do so, even without UNSCOM, if necessary. We will certainly be better placed after this military strike than if we had to go on dealing with a Saddam Hussein whose military capability had not been weakened and with an UNSCOM increasingly impeded from doing any serious work. We will maintain and enforce rigorously the existing sanctions. If necessary, and if we have serious evidence from our intensive surveillance or from intelligence that his capability is being rebuilt, we will be ready to take further military action. Saddam should have no doubt whatever of our continuing resolve on that point.

We shall in any case do all we can to ensure that the present arrangements of oil sales for food and medicine can continue. I trust that, this time, Saddam will allow the mechanism to work properly, for the benefit of his people, rather than continue to spread lies about the effect of sanctions. He has the means to care for his people, if he chooses to use them.

Again, let us be clear: the Iraqi authorities can import as much food and medicines as they need. If there are nutritional problems in Iraq, they are not the result of sanctions. Let us not forget that Iraq is continuing to export food to her neighbours. We also constantly look at ways in which we can do more to help alleviate the suffering of the Iraqi people, for example, whenever we review the workings of the sanctions and oil for food regimes, and through our own aid effort.

The decision to take military action against Iraq was taken with great regret. It is a heavy responsibility. There will be casualties in Iraq, despite all our efforts, although I hope that all concerned will be fully alert to Saddam's very well-documented modus operandi of fabrication of evidence.

I am encouraged by the international reaction: most of our allies have offered full support, and others who have felt unable to do so have shown their understanding. I believe that, among the Arab countries, the view expressed at their meeting in Doha in November, that Saddam must bear the responsibility for what happens, holds good.

As I said last night, we have absolutely no quarrel with the Iraqi people. We have no desire to jeopardise the territorial integrity of Iraq. Indeed, we look forward to the day when Iraq will have the Government its people deserve and will once again be a great country. We have the deepest respect for Islamic sensibilities, here and in the region. We have acted because we must act to counter a real and present danger from a tyrant who has never hesitated to use whatever weapons are to hand.

I would rather that we had not had to do this. I am aware of the risks that we are asking our forces to face. I do so, not lightly, but with a profound sense of responsibility. However, I do so confident they will achieve our aims and convinced that we have taken the right course of action. Whatever the risks we face today, they are as nothing compared to the risks if we do not halt Saddam Hussein's programme of developing chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction. I ask the House for its support.

Mr. William Hague (Richmond, Yorks): May I express, on behalf of the Opposition, our full support for the action that has been taken by the Government and the United States, while regretting that it has been made necessary by the persistent failure of the Iraqi leader to keep his word or honour international obligations?

The Opposition share the Prime Minister's view that he and the President of the United States had no alternative but to order a military response to the continuous deceit of Saddam, his refusal to meet his international obligations, his repeated testing of western resolve and his determination to develop weapons of mass destruction. We support the decision that the military operations should not only strike at his ability to develop such weapons of mass destruction, but diminish the military threat he poses to his neighbours. We also support the Prime Minister in making it clear that the operation—the necessity of which we all regret—is directed not at the Iraqi people, but at their leader.

We recognise that the Prime Minister cannot give details of the operations at this stage, but, with British forces now in action, will he confirm to the House that clear and agreed rules of engagement have been confirmed with our United States allies? Can he inform the House of who has taken overall command of the operation, including the British role in it? What action are the Government taking, in parallel with the military operation, on the diplomatic front, especially to redouble efforts to maintain good relations with our many friends, allies and partners in the Gulf?

Will the Prime Minister further inform the House what support he has received from our allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation and the European Union? Given the obvious risk of retaliatory measures of some kind, will he confirm that the Government have taken all possible steps to safeguard British lives and property at home and abroad? What does the Prime Minister envisage happening immediately after the completion of the military action? For instance, what future does he now foresee for the UNSCOM mission?

Our priority today is obviously the military operation. However, will the Prime Minister comment further on the long-term strategy behind it? The evidence now suggests overwhelmingly that Saddam Hussein cannot be trusted to meet his international obligations in any serious way. Does that not lead us to the conclusion that a prime objective of western policy, to which this kind of action can make a contribution, must be to bring about his removal? As President Clinton said last night:

"the best way to end that threat to peace once and for all is with a new Iraqi government".

Britain is very fortunate in having the finest aircrews in the world. We can have no doubt that they and the excellent ground crews who support them will give a good account of themselves in whatever they are called on to do. We express our complete support for this operation and for all that our armed forces will do in the coming hours and days.

In addition, we believe that the overall objective of our policy towards Iraq should be to remove Saddam from power rather than temporarily checking his ambitions. None of us wants an outcome that would mean that we find ourselves in the same position, faced, year by year, with the same threat and forced again to take the same action.

The Prime Minister: First, I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his support. I agree entirely with what he said, particularly that this action is directed not at the Iraqi people, but at the brutal dictatorship of Saddam Hussein.

Yes, of course there are clear and agreed rules of engagement with our US allies. On the diplomatic front, we are obviously working very hard throughout the entire world—in the Gulf, the European Union and elsewhere. A large number of countries have already indicated their support: among them, Germany, Japan, Australia, Austria, the Netherlands, Spain and Canada. It is obviously important to bring home to people the simple choice that we faced: we could either let the inspection regime effectively disintegrate or take action.

We have done all that we can to safeguard British lives and property. Our long-term strategy is to secure compliance with the United Nations resolutions either through UNSCOM or through direct military action. I agree entirely that a broad objective of our policy is to remove Saddam Hussein and to do all that we can to achieve that. However, I was reluctant to commit myself—I do not think that we could do so responsibly—to that outcome as an actual objective of this military action.

Of course, it is correct that we face a danger in this world while Saddam Hussein remains, as anyone who looks at the history will know. I have a lot of material with me—much of which could be made available to hon. Members without creating any security problems—which details what the weapons programmes were, how difficult it was to gain access and the chronology of all the bits of obstruction that occurred. One problem is that people find it hard to contemplate in this day and age that someone could act in this evil and brutal way. However, I am afraid that there is such a person and he cannot be allowed access to those weapons. If we can possibly find the means of removing him, we will.

However, our objectives for this military action are those that I have set out. I believe that they are achievable. I think that we will significantly degrade and diminish Saddam as a threat to his neighbours and his weapon-making capability, which is what we should do.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): These are anxious and sombre moments for the House and the Prime Minister, as he has just demonstrated, but most particularly for the Royal Air Force aircrew and their families. They ought to be uppermost in our thoughts.

Does the Prime Minister understand that he enjoys Liberal Democrat support for the action that he has taken in deploying British forces against Saddam Hussein? Does he agree that the need to use military force against Saddam Hussein should be regarded not as a cause for celebration or satisfaction but as a painful necessity and last resort to which we have been driven when all other options have been exhausted? Is it not worth repeating yet again that, but for Saddam Hussein's repeated defiance and deception, the issue of compliance with United Nations resolutions could have been resolved several years ago?

The Prime Minister rightly acknowledged the importance of minimising civilian casualties. Does he accept that it is essential to be stringent in the selection of targets? Will he give instructions that, where there is any doubt, the presumption will be against attack?

Finally, in a wider sense, does the Prime Minister understand that there are many who support him on this occasion but remain concerned to ensure that he uses all his endeavours to persuade the United States of the importance of being even-handed throughout the middle east?

The Prime Minister: Once again, I thank the hon. and learned Gentleman for Liberal Democrat support. One of the reasons why, in the statement, I set out at so much length the background to the situation is so that people outside the House understand how we came to this point. Having debated the issue on many occasions, we are all familiar with the facts, but many people are not and wonder why it is necessary to take action now. It is important to set out that background.

I agree that the action is not a cause for celebration; it is a terrible thing to have to do. It is a grim necessity and should never be expressed in any other terms. I can assure the hon. and learned Gentleman that I feel that myself keenly.

The hon. and learned Gentleman's point about compliance with UN resolutions is right. At the end of the Gulf war, following the ceasefire, Saddam remained in office and it was predicated as part of the agreement that was made that UNSCOM would go in and do its work. Saddam agreed that he would co-operate fully. We have had seven years of prevarication.

The targets are, of course, extremely carefully chosen. We make every effort to do that as responsibly as we should, and I hope that we act in these circumstances with a responsibility that Saddam Hussein would never contemplate.

The US is acting even-handedly, as President Clinton's visit to Palestinian territory the other day demonstrates. This action has nothing to do with anything other than a

[The Prime Minister]

quarrel with Saddam Hussein and a weapons capacity that simply has to be diminished for the sake of the safety of the world.

Mr. Stuart Bell (Middlesbrough): Building on the question from the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) about the need to keep civilian casualties to a minimum, does the Prime Minister recall from his wide reading how German troops entered the Rheinland in 1936 without let or hindrance from the international community and in violation of international agreements? Did not Adolf Hitler that day sign the death warrants of some 20 million people in the ensuing war? Is it not the case that, if Saddam Hussein were allowed to continue to build his biological and chemical weapons without let or hindrance from the United States or the United Kingdom, he would be allowed to sign death warrants for people in the middle east who are alive and well today?

The Prime Minister: I fully agree. There are records of some 20,000 people unaccounted for in Iraq's internal regime. Saddam has used chemical weapons on the Kurds, invaded Kuwait and developed an entire weapons capability. He cannot safely be allowed to take such actions. My hon. Friend is absolutely right—the question is not what price we will pay if we act now, but what price we will pay if we do not.

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): I endorse the Prime Minister's statement, as I recall personally that it was in direct response to the ceasefire that the most solemn undertaking was given on behalf of Saddam Hussein to General Schwarzkopf and General de la Billiere that Iraq would not only undertake to allow the destruction of its weapons of mass destruction but no longer pursue a programme of their production. Faced with Saddam Hussein's continuing obstruction, including his refusal to recognise the final warning, the Prime Minister and the President clearly had no choice. None the less, as the Prime Minister said, it is a very heavy responsibility to commit our forces, and American forces, to what is a most difficult undertaking, and one of which we cannot be sure of a successful outcome.

Against that background—I draw modestly on my own experience—may I say that these events will be accompanied by a media frenzy in which rumour will fill any gaps in the available information, in which the sensitivities of neighbouring countries will be crucial and in which it will be vital to maintain the closest possible communication and commonalty of objectives between the United States and ourselves and the closest possible communication with our friends and allies in the region?

The Prime Minister: That is right. It is one reason why I wanted to set out the background in such detail and give people full information. It is important that they understand. It is also important for us constantly to be in communication with our allies out in the Gulf and in the Islamic world, and, of course, with others. It is one of the reasons why we established a limited set of military objectives, which are clear and specific. We believe that we can attain those objectives, but I agree that it is important that what we say we are going to do, we do, and that we keep in the closest possible communication with our allies in helping us do that.

Mr. Gerald Kaufman (Manchester, Gorton): My right hon. Friend referred to the internal situation in the United States. Is he aware of the nausea felt by many of us in the House at the fact that when, with the clear authorisation of specific United Nations Security Council resolutions, he takes the awesome and proper decision to bring our troops into action and to risk their lives, some people say that what he is doing is some kind of cronyish favour to the President of the United States? When our men are being asked to risk their lives, that is a despicable thing to say.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, although some people point to the fact that this action, even though taken under Security Council resolutions, was taken by Britain and the United States only, and imply that we are somehow isolated, Britain has taken action before, in 1940 when we stood up to the Nazis, and it was a matter of pride because we were doing the right thing, as we are doing the right thing now?

Will my right hon. Friend confirm, in line with what he has told the House this afternoon, that we will keep on, that we will retain sanctions and that, where necessary, we will continue military action until Saddam Hussein has either learned to behave or been removed?

The Prime Minister: Yes, Madam Speaker. I thank my right hon. Friend for his support. I believe it to be in the best traditions of this country and its history to stand up and do the right thing, not just for this country but for the greater peace, stability and security of the world.

As I said in my statement, my own strong personal view is that this action had to be taken now because we said back on 14, 15 and 16 November that, if there was any further refusal to co-operate, we would take action immediately. The Butler report was due in a month, and came out almost a month to the day that we made that statement. The report said that there had been no co-operation—in fact, in some respects there was less co-operation than there had been before.

My judgment was that it was obvious from that point that we were going to have to take action. To have delayed taking action—let us also assume, rightly, I think, that it would have been wrong and offensive to begin that military action in Ramadan—would have given Saddam Hussein five or six weeks in which to prepare his defences and disperse his capability. Of course, it would then have been harder for our people to fulfil their functions. I have absolutely no doubt that now is the right time to act.

Mrs. Margaret Ewing (Moray): The Prime Minister will be aware that the RAF Tornados in action all come from RAF Lossiemouth in my constituency. Therefore, with that very strange mixture of pride in their professionalism and fear for their lives, which I think the House would endorse, my thoughts are immediately with the aircrews and their families. May I, over the next few hours—I hope that it will be hours rather than days—be kept fully informed of all relevant constituency information?

Is the Prime Minister satisfied that all possible international negotiations and consultation took place before the decision was taken to launch the attack?

We have all heard and read very many different reports. Is he convinced that the action, which is putting at risk many people's lives, will guarantee his hope that the ultimate outcome will be no remaining opportunity to do further wrong?

The Prime Minister: I agree, of course, that the pilots who are taking the action are immensely brave people, as I said in my statement. We are happy to keep the hon. Lady informed of any developments. She asked whether negotiations and consultation had been properly in place. It is seven years since the original undertaking was given. The past 14 months have been just a game of to-ing and fro-ing for Saddam Hussein. There is agreement right across the international community that compliance with UN resolutions and unconditional, unrestricted access for inspectors to find and destroy the weapons are necessary. That is not in any dispute. There is agreement, too, with UN inspectors' conclusions that Saddam Hussein is not providing such unconditional, unrestricted access. The question is what do we do. Either we decide that he can carry on impeding their work, effectively negating the first thing that we said that we had agreed—that it is necessary to secure compliance with the resolutions—or we take action.

I assure the hon. Lady that it has taken so long to take this action precisely because of our desire to avoid it—if at all costs we could do so. That was the reason why we decided at the last moment on 14 November, even as planes were in the region and ready to take action, that we would call it off. I remember people at the time who said, "You should have gone ahead, in any event. What store can you set by Saddam Hussein's words to you?" But we said, "Let us give this one last chance to work." I do not think that anybody can reasonably complain about the length of time that we have spent trying to achieve a peaceful, diplomatic solution.

Unless force is always ruled out, it is difficult to find any other reasonable conclusion if there is no chance of preventing the development of such a capability without the use of force. That is why we have done what we have done. I assure the hon. Lady that the decision was made only after a great deal of thought and painstaking negotiation and consultation over months. I am afraid that there comes a point when one must face reality. The reality is that either we let Saddam Hussein develop weapons—effectively allowing him to disintegrate the weapons-inspecting regime—or we act with military force. That was the honest, true choice that we faced. I believe that we made the only choice that we could responsibly make.

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin): The Prime Minister twice mentioned the words "diminish" and "degrade". I wonder whether he thought, as I did at lunchtime, as bleeding women and children were carried into hospitals, that those who were diminished and degraded were not the Iraqis, but us? We are diminished and degraded by being reduced to the tail on this verminous and mangy Desert Fox. *[Interruption.]* This is a free Parliament and I will have my say in it.

The Prime Minister mentioned Ramadan. He thrice said that it would have been wrong to begin military action during Ramadan, but he has not said that it will not continue during Ramadan. Will he assure the House on that point?

What does the Prime Minister think opinion in the 1,000 million-strong Islamic community around the world will be as it begins Ramadan this weekend—that an Arab Muslim capital is in flames at the hands of a new crusade, but this time led, not by Richard the Lionheart, but by Clinton the liar? And why did he not find time to mention that three of the five members of the Security Council, including our sister socialist Government in France, have condemned this escapade, and that the General-Secretary of the Arab League has today, on behalf of the Arab League—the Arab countries—denounced it as an Anglo-American aggression?

The Prime Minister: First, if I may point out factually, the French have not condemned it. Secondly, the Gulf Co-operation Council of Arab states made it clear in its statement a short time ago that it believes that the responsibility lies with Saddam Hussein for not having abided by the agreement that he entered into. Of course my hon. Friend is quite right—this is a free Parliament, and he is entitled to have his say. That is part of living in a democracy. It is not, of course, something that he would have, were he living in Iraq.

I simply want to say to my hon. Friend—to be honest, I think that I am sort of past anger—that I find it curious that he should attack President Clinton personally and mention not a word of condemnation of Saddam Hussein. He has a curious sense of priorities. I do not believe that people in the Muslim world or the Arab world are in any doubt, and it is our job to go out and show them, as I said so clearly, that the enemy of the Iraqi people is not the British or the American Government; the enemy of the Iraqi people is a dictator who has repressed that people for years and years and years. Saddam Hussein cannot be allowed, however, to threaten the rest of the world, and I find it extraordinary that anyone from my own political party—from my own background and beliefs in the Labour party—could actually make a statement without condemning once the things that he has done: the killing of those Kurdish people, the fact that 20,000 people are unaccounted for, the political executions that happen in Iraq every day, the invasion of Kuwait, or the development of weapons of nuclear, chemical and biological warfare.

It is possible—and quite right in this free democracy of ours—for people to get up and say, "Look, this is the wrong thing to do. You should not do it." I understand that argument. But let us at least agree that this man is an evil dictator, and that any attack on us for what we have done should never ever be seen by the outside world as some support for him.

Mr. Douglas Hogg (Sleaford and North Hykeham): The right hon. Gentleman has said that the House would agree that the removal of Saddam Hussein would be a very desirable outcome of what has happened. One of the tactics that the Americans and British Government might seek to employ would be to encourage the Shi'a in the south of Iraq, or the Kurds in the north of Iraq, to rise up against Saddam Hussein. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that, unless the United States Government and the British Government were to offer very substantial and effective military assistance, the probabilities are that the Shi'a and the Kurds would be crushed, with great loss of life? Does the right hon. Gentleman therefore agree that, unless the United States Government and the British

[Mr. Douglas Hogg]

Government are willing to provide substantial and effective military cover for the Shi'a and the Kurds, they should not be encouraged to rise up against Saddam Hussein?

The Prime Minister: I agree with the right hon. and learned Gentleman's last point. It is important that we do not encourage anyone to do things if we are not in a position to give them the protection that they need. At this stage, we simply cannot assess what the impact of the action that we have taken on Saddam Hussein will be. Obviously, if he were removed, it would be to everyone's benefit. Partly because I believe that it is important that we get the maximum possible support in the rest of the world, I have been hesitant and anxious throughout not to make a commitment beyond a commitment that I believe that we can achieve.

Mr. Clive Soley (Ealing, Acton and Shepherd's Bush): May I tell my right hon. Friend, as someone who represents in his constituency a large number of Muslims, Arabs and Iraqi refugees, that he will have far more support in those communities both here and around the world than is readily apparent? It is false to imply that the people of the Islamic religion, especially those who have suffered at the hands of the Iraqi dictator, believe that Saddam Hussein's behaviour is acceptable just because they happen to have a disagreement with Israel. Israel is another matter. Many of them would agree with me that the dictators who have so disfigured the face of the 20th century need to be stopped. When we cannot stop them here and now, we need to be able to put them on trial before the International Criminal Court when they lose power, as we will eventually do. Let us go forward into the 21st century proud of the role that we have taken, difficult though it may be. I assure my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister that the support is there in all communities.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for that. I am sure that he is right in what he says about the Muslim community, which contributes so much to this country and represents all the best instincts of peace and stability. It is also right to draw attention to the need for the international community to recognise that we live in a different set of circumstances today. The technology exists to develop weapons that are horrific. That is one of the reasons why it is so important that Britain remains engaged in all the international conventions on nuclear weapons and weapons of chemical and biological warfare. I am afraid that there is a sense in which there must be some point at which today's international community acts in order to stave off a potential threat to the world. This is such a situation.

Rev. Martin Smyth (Belfast, South): May I assure the Prime Minister from this Bench that the greater number of people in Northern Ireland support the attacks whole-heartedly? He mentioned oil for food and medicines. There are those who think that that is an American attempt to get oil. May we have an assurance that attempts are being made to ensure that Saddam does not simply feed his soldiers and supporters, rather than deal with his people who are in need? May we have a repetition from the Prime Minister that Saddam's palaces are not country houses but large estates that cover acres of territory, which makes it more difficult to inspect them?

The Prime Minister: That is right. Part of the difficulty has been that Saddam has siphoned off any money that he can into his weapon-making capability. From memory, I think that he has spent about $1.2 billion on the presidential sites and related military capability. We try to put in place as tough a regime as we possibly can, but we are desperate at the same time to allow Saddam to sell oil in order that the Iraqi people are fed and have the medicines that they need. Saddam could do so much more. There is no need for any people to suffer nutritional deficiencies in Iraq. That cannot be said often enough. People can be fed if Saddam will allow it, but for his own reasons and his own propaganda, he does not. We are always looking at ways of improving the regime, but there is no reason why he cannot feed his people properly and give them the medicines that they need, except the fact that he refuses to do so.

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): Is the Prime Minister aware of the difficulty that on the condemnation of Saddam Hussein there is overwhelming unanimous world opinion, while on the decision to take military action he and the United States have been unable to persuade the Security Council, which requires the support of the five permanent members, which means that this military action is a flagrant breach of article 46 of the charter of the United Nations? The Prime Minister said that something must be done, but that was tried seven years ago when 200,000 Iraqis were killed, many of them innocent, and Saddam Hussein was left stronger than before. There are many people in the world, and I am one of them, who believe that what was done yesterday is deeply immoral and contrary to an ethical foreign policy, of which we boast. For that reason, I shall take the limited opportunity open to me to vote against the war by calling for a division on the Adjournment of the House at 10 o'clock tonight.

The Prime Minister: I have no doubt that we have the proper legal authority, as it is contained in successive Security Council resolution documents. I respect the fact that my right hon. Friend takes a different view, but he also condemned the action that we took to drive Saddam out of Kuwait. Does anyone believe that, if we had not taken military action in the Gulf war, Saddam Hussein could have been negotiated out of Kuwait? That is not credible.

I accept that not all the international community will endorse the action, but the entire international community agrees two things: first, that Saddam's building of weapons of mass destruction must be stopped and, secondly, that he is in breach of his obligations to deliver up all the documents and ensure that the inspectors can do their job properly. At some point, either we decide to carry on in endless negotiation—with Saddam able to destroy the records of where the weapons are, prevent the inspectors from doing their job and build up his weapon-making capability again—or we decide to use force.

Unless people take a pacifist view and argue that force should never be used, irrespective of the circumstances, I do not know how, after seven years, they can reasonably

say, yes, we agree that Saddam must be prevented from developing those weapons, but, no, we are never prepared to use force to stop him.

Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex): First, when these matters have drawn to a conclusion and UNSCOM is able to go about its business again in Iraq, and given that the Prime Minister agreed with me the other day that UNSCOM's work following the Annan agreement had become heavily compromised, will he give consideration to a new and better system for UNSCOM to do its work in Iraq, so that it can go about its business without outside interference from people claiming to be a liaison between it and the Government of Iraq?

Secondly, will the Prime Minister take under his own wing the responsibility to ensure that our allies and friends in the Gulf are kept informed, at the highest level, of the reasons for the actions that he has rightly undertaken?

The Prime Minister: On the latter point, we are in constant contact with allies and friends in the Gulf at the highest level.

Of course, we always look at how we can improve the UNSCOM regime. There have been many attacks on Richard Butler, the head of the special commission. Richard Butler was a former ambassador to the United Nations. He used to work for Gough Whitlam and was appointed by the previous Labour Government in Australia as ambassador to the UN. He is deeply committed to the UN. The views that he presents in his report are not just his views; they are the views of all the inspectors. It is important for us to remember that. The idea that a man with such a track record and those beliefs is some stooge of the Americans or the British is entirely false.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that the Queen has signified Her Royal Assent to the following Act:

Consolidated Fund (No. 2) Act 1998

Iraq

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mr. Jamieson.]*

4.28 pm

Mr. Andrew Robathan (Blaby): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. We have just had a statement on Iraq, and we are to have a debate on Iraq. Would it not have been more usual and have saved time if the Prime Minister had introduced the debate? Would that not have been a better procedure?

Madam Speaker: That is not a matter for me.

Mr. Harry Barnes (North-East Derbyshire): On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It has been pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) that there is no opportunity for a vote at the end of the debate, except on the motion for the Adjournment. Early-day motion 148 could fruitfully be used as the basis for a debate now, so that we could have the proper vote at the end.

Madam Speaker: I do not have the powers to change the business. Would that I were so powerful.

4.29 pm

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mr. Robin Cook): We have arranged for this debate in the House at the first available opportunity after military action to give hon. Members the opportunity to debate that action and the background to it.

All hon. Members will wish to remember that we debate this matter in the security of our Chamber while British service men are in action in circumstances of some danger. At the outset, I follow my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister in recording the appreciation of all in the House for their courage and professionalism. I open the debate by setting out why we had to call upon them to take that military action.

My starting point is the report submitted by Richard Butler to the Security Council. That report could not make it more clear that Saddam has not kept the commitments which averted military action only last month. The report details the familiar pattern of obstruction, delay and deception.

Mr. Jeremy Corbyn (Islington, North): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: I shall give way to my hon. Friend in a moment if he allows me to continue with this passage.

Since the work of the United Nations Special Commission resumed, it has requested 12 sets of documents that could answer crucial questions about Iraq's chemical weapons and missile programmes. Iraq has responded to only one of those 12 requests.

The Iraqi authorities have blocked attempts by UNSCOM to carry out site inspections. Only last Wednesday, a team of inspectors was refused entry to a storage facility on the ground that it was a political headquarters of the Ba'ath party.

[Mr. Cook]

Let me describe to the House the precise nature of the building in question. It is a large rectangular warehouse. A thick steel trap-door, 3 m^2, gives access to a cellar beneath the warehouse which is of the same size. The shed is guarded by members of the interior security service, commanded by an officer with the rank of lieutenant colonel. Let us be frank. This lieutenant colonel is not on duty to safeguard political election posters, even if elections were allowed in Iraq. Baghdad's pretence that the warehouse and its underground cellar are political offices is only another of the empty pretexts with which it has persistently sought to hinder the work of the UN inspectors.

Mr. Corbyn: Can my right hon. Friend explain when Richard Butler's report was received by the Security Council, and what steps were taken by the British or American Governments to call a special meeting of the Security Council to gain its authority before any military action could be taken? Or was the action taken without the Security Council's authority after the production of the report?

Mr. Cook: The action has been taken with the full authority of repeated Security Council resolutions, supported by all members of the Security Council. Let us not forget that the lead-in time for this military action is not the day or so since Richard Butler's report; it is the 10 months since Saddam first threw out the inspectors last February. It is during that period that two successive resolutions have given us the authority to carry out this action.

Mr. Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Will the Foreign Secretary give way?

Mr. Cook: I shall give way on this occasion, but then I must make progress.

Mr. Leigh: Does the right hon. Gentleman accept that aerial bombing will not destroy Saddam's capability, only degrade it, and nor will it remove him from office? Will he confirm that it may be difficult for UNSCOM to return once the bombing stops? Given that military action on the ground is ruled out, what is the right hon. Gentleman's and the Government's game plan for the future? How do they intend to resolve the crisis? Or are they asking the House to support military action again and again, which may well be necessary?

Mr. Cook: If the hon. Gentleman wishes to intervene at such length with so many different questions, he can take full part in the debate. The Prime Minister has already made it perfectly clear that to displace Saddam Hussein would require a commitment of tens of thousands of ground troops and the acceptance of casualties well beyond anything that we are asking the House to accept. We have clear objectives, which I will deal with in my speech, both substantially to set back Saddam's weapons programmes and to diminish the military threat that he poses to the region, and we are confident that this aerial strike can achieve those objectives. I shall lay them out before the House in my speech.

Mr. Neil Gerrard (Walthamstow): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: No, I must return to my text, but my hon. Friend will have other opportunities to intervene.

In two further cases, in addition to the one that I have described, inspections were delayed after Iraq declared the sites to be sensitive. When the inspectors were finally granted permission to enter, they found that the building had been swept clean.

Such attempts to hinder and obstruct the work of UNSCOM have been standard practice in Baghdad ever since the inspection regime was imposed by the United Nations. Given Saddam's undertaking last month that UNSCOM would have unconditional and unrestricted access, it is to be deplored that Baghdad still practises the same sustained web of deceit and deception. Saddam still avoids answering questions and prevents UNSCOM from finding the answers.

I must also tell the House that, in the period since Saddam gave his undertaking to co-operate, he has introduced new, fresh restrictions on the work of UNSCOM. The Baghdad authorities have demanded a formal letter of request for the inspection of a sensitive site, including details of what was sought at the site—presumably in order that they could more easily remove any such documents and material from the site. Until August, UNSCOM had provided data on Iraqi missile tests and engines. Since UNSCOM went back in November, Iraq has refused to release such data. Until August, UNSCOM was allowed to carry out its own study on the engine components of missiles to establish their range. Since November, UNSCOM has been denied the removal of missile components for analysis.

Since Saddam pledged full co-operation in November, UNSCOM has experienced no greater co-operation than before. On the contrary, it has been subjected to even greater deception and obstruction. That is why the conclusion of Mr. Butler's report is stark and unequivocal. The inspectors are not able to carry out the disarmament work which they are mandated to do.

Mr. Butler has received the full wrath of the Baghdad propaganda machine. I share the views expressed by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister as I have known Mr. Butler for a number of years. I first met him long before he became the head of UNSCOM. I know him to be a man of great independence of mind and integrity. He is also whole-heartedly dedicated to the United Nations and the international rule of law. Nor is his report the report of one isolated individual. It would be overwhelmingly endorsed by all the inspectors who know from experience the repeated obstacles that have made their job so frustrating.

Mr. George Galloway (Glasgow, Kelvin): If Mr. Butler is such a paragon of virtue, why did Mr. Prakash Shah, the special envoy of Mr. Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, describe him to me, on the basis of more than 20 years' knowledge, as a congenital liar?

Mr. Cook: We must all speak from our own experience. As Mr. Butler is not in the Chamber to defend

himself against the grave charge that my hon. Friend has made against him—a charge that we are not permitted to make against each other—I will vigorously rebut that charge and say that throughout the period in which I have known Mr. Butler, not just as a colleague but as a friend, he has shown himself to be consistently honest and dedicated to international and political ideals that in other circumstances my hon. Friend would share. It is, therefore, important for all of us to remember, when we read propaganda against Mr. Butler, that he is so unpopular in Baghdad not because he is a liar or deficient in his job, but because he does his job only too well.

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving way. Does he remember that Mr. Butler's predecessor was Mr. Rolf Ekeus, a Finnish diplomat of considerable distinction, whose experience at the hands of Saddam Hussein was exactly the same as that of Mr. Richard Butler?

Mr. Cook: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes a fair point. No leader of UNSCOM who has done the job effectively has been able to earn any reception or good word in Baghdad. Perhaps we should worry if he did receive a good word in Baghdad.

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): When we listen to the remarks of my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway), who has spoken twice today, should we not bear it in mind that, on a visit to Baghdad in 1994, he was widely quoted as saying to Saddam Hussein face to face:

"Sir, I salute your courage, your strength and I want you to know we are with you until victory"?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael J. Martin): Order. That intervention was far too long.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) will no doubt wish to respond to that point later in the debate. In the meantime, I strongly urge the whole House to remember that, when Baghdad tries to turn this matter into a confrontation between the west and the Muslim world, every single one of those who have been killed by Saddam Hussein over the years has been a Muslim, whether Iranian, Kurd or Shi'ite. We must not fall for the idea that, in standing up for international law and halting the use of weapons of mass terror against Arab neighbours, we are somehow taking part in a war against the Muslim world.

Mr. Butler's report compelled us to decide, with great reluctance, that there was no alternative but to take military action against Iraq. I remind the House that we have made every effort to avoid this outcome. If we have erred, it has always been on the side of caution. Throughout the whole of this year, we have given Saddam Hussein repeated opportunities to comply with his obligations to the United Nations. Last February, the permanent members of the Security Council—all five of them—mandated Kofi Annan to travel to Baghdad to seek a diplomatic outcome. Saddam Hussein then entered into an undertaking with the Secretary-General that he would allow UNSCOM to get on with its job. That undertaking was endorsed by a resolution of the Security Council, backed by all its members, which warned Saddam that, if he broke the agreement, there would be "the severest consequences". Six months later, he went back on the agreement and stopped all new site inspections.

Only last month, we again gave Saddam another chance to prove that there was an alternative to military action. We could not have been clearer about what would happen if he did not keep his promise. The UN Secretary-General said:

"I am not sure, if there is a next time, if we will have time for further diplomatic initiatives",

yet, once again, Saddam has broken his promises.

No Foreign Minister can be satisfied when events compel the need for military force. The aim of diplomacy is to avert the need for such actions, but diplomacy can work only if the other side is prepared to negotiate in good faith. With Saddam, diplomacy has not worked because he has entered into agreements with cynicism and broken them with contempt. At stake is not an abstract principle of diplomacy, but the real threat posed by Saddam's capacity to produce weapons of terror.

Saddam has not accounted to UNSCOM for 600 tonnes of the chemical precursors for the VX nerve agent. That would be sufficient to produce 200 tonnes of the VX nerve agent. One plane load of VX would be enough to devastate the population of any of the smaller states in the region.

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: I shall give way in a moment to my hon. Friend and neighbour.

UNSCOM also estimates that Iraq has the equipment and the growth agents to produce 350 litres of anthrax a week—enough to fill two missile warheads a week. One warhead would wipe out any of the larger cities in the region.

Mr. Dalyell: On the assumption that those 610 tonnes exist, has the Foreign Office given the Foreign Secretary an assessment of the environmental consequences if there were a direct hit on such a chemical or biological arsenal?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend asked the same question during our debate in February and the response that I gave then remains valid—that, in our targeting plans, we have taken great care not to release into the atmosphere chemical or biological weapons that may be complete. With Saddam, we face not an arsenal of completed weapons, but the capacity and potential to produce completed weapons within months if we turn our backs on him. That is why we can interrupt the supply chain to the final product with no danger of the final product being released into the atmosphere. Our objective is to ensure that we set back by several years Saddam's attempt to produce those weapons.

The Opposition have asked, perfectly properly, for the precise and clear objectives of this military action. We have two clear objectives. The first is to defeat Saddam's ambitions to continue to develop such weapons, with which he could terrorise his neighbours. We want a peaceful outcome, but we know that an outcome that left Saddam able to develop those weapons without hindrance would not be peaceful; it would be a guarantee that those weapons would be used. Saddam used chemical and

[Mr. Cook]

biological weapons against his citizens when he wiped out the entire town of Halabja. He has used the weapons before, and he will use them again if he is allowed to keep them.

In the course of today, an increasing number of statements from Governments around the world have expressed their understanding of that case and the need to take this action to halt Saddam's weapons programme.

Mr. William Cash (Stone): Would the right hon. Gentleman be good enough to explain why the French appear not to be giving the support that we might have expected in the circumstances, particularly given the joint declaration on defence made only a week ago, which refers to international responsibilities and the fact that our two countries should take joint action in such international matters?

Mr. Cook: Given the gravity of this international crisis, it is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman should trot out his own King Charles's head on Europe—*[Interruption.]* If hon. Members will listen, they will hear that many European countries have backed what we have said. [HON. MEMBERS: "Answer the question."] I am going to answer the hon. Gentleman, and I hope that he will listen.

The Prime Minister of France has made it clear that the action was provoked by the steps taken by Saddam Hussein. Compared with the position that France took on the previous crisis, on this occasion, France has shown restraint. It has not wished to get involved in open hostility to the action that we have taken. Earlier today, I had a successful conversation with the French Foreign Minister, in which we agreed to work together in the future, particularly in relation to Iraq.

Chancellor Schröder's spokesman said:

"The Iraqi leadership was warned and had to assume that the international community could not stand by and watch."

This morning, the Austrian Foreign Minister, who currently holds the European Union presidency, said:

"We must make Saddam Hussein fully responsible for this".

He recognised that the Iraqi leadership had been given ample opportunity.

The Foreign Minister of the Netherlands described our actions as "unavoidable". The Spanish Defence Minister described military action as "inevitable". The Finnish Prime Minister said:

"We are involved in this together—the United Nations versus Iraq."

Mr. Quentin Davies (Grantham and Stamford): The right hon. Gentleman brushes aside rather too lightly the important point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Stone (Mr. Cash). Is it not extremely serious that different members of the European Union are sending discordant signals to a proven aggressor, thereby encouraging him to believe that we can be played off one against another? Is it not time that the Government made some progress—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. Hon. Members are making speeches rather than interventions.

Mr. Cook: The hon. Gentleman should not generalise from the case of one country. I have quoted half a dozen European countries that are with us in the action that we have taken. Let me add another. In a statement today to the Italian Senate, the Italian Foreign Minister said:

"The use of force . . . arose above all from the behaviour of the Baghdad Government . . . The possession of weapons of mass destruction constitutes not only a violation to the UN but also a permanent threat to neighbours."

We have taken this action with the overwhelming support of our close allies, our friends around the world, and the overwhelming majority of the UN Security Council.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Cook: No, I wish to proceed with my speech.

Our second clear objective is to reduce the threat to Saddam's neighbours by diminishing his military war machine. Our targets are precise and are confined either to facilities that are part of his weapons programmes or to his military power base.

It is, of course, military power that keeps Saddam in power. We are not in conflict with the vast majority of the Iraqi people, with whom we have a common enemy in Saddam. Only last October, the UN rapporteur on human rights in Iraq, Max van der Stoel, published his latest assessment. It is an appalling catalogue of human rights abuse, which includes the mass execution of 62 detainees without trial, the assassination of senior and respected Shi'ite scholars, and the use of amputation as a punishment.

The same UN rapporteur also holds Saddam primarily responsible for the shortages of food and medicine for the Iraqi people.

Mr. Dennis Canavan (Falkirk, West): We would all like to get rid of the ruthless dictator Saddam Hussein, but there is concern on both sides of the Atlantic that the American-British military operation—and its timing—may have more to do with keeping President Clinton in office than with getting Saddam Hussein out of office. Why should the lives of British service personnel be put at risk—and why should innocent men, women and children in Iraq be sacrificed—in what appears to be a desperate attempt to save Clinton's skin?

Mr. Cook: The Prime Minister and members of the Cabinet would never ask our airmen to go into action for such a purpose. We have not done so on this occasion. We have asked them to go into action to preserve the rule of the United Nations resolutions, and to prevent Saddam from developing those weapons of terror that I have described to the House. My hon. Friend would have to have an extremely exaggerated sense of conspiracy to imagine that the timetable of the UNSCOM inspections and of the report from Richard Butler was arranged six weeks ago so that it would come to fruition at this particular moment.

Mr. Edward Garnier (Harborough): Is not the reality the exact opposite of the point made by the hon. Member for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan)? Is it not Saddam Hussein who calculates when he believes that the west is distracted, and who chooses moments such as this—when the domestic circumstances in America are helpful to him—rather than the other way around?

Mr. Cook: The hon. and learned Gentleman makes a fair point about the calculations of Saddam Hussein but,

equally, we should all recognise that anyone who employs brinkmanship all the time sometimes mistakes where the brink is. He could not have been given clearer warnings on this occasion; he has chosen to ignore them.

Mr. Hugh Bayley (City of York): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Mr. Cook: This will be the last time.

Mr. Bayley: I am most grateful. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, when it came to timing, to delay action would have endangered our military objectives and our service men, who are committed to achieving those objectives? Would not delay have allowed the Iraqi regime more time to prepare weapons to use against them?

Mr. Cook: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point. The longer the build-up to and expectation of an attack on Iraq, the greater would have been Iraq's preparations for it. The result would have been a greater risk to our service personnel. Had we been obliged to delay such action until the end of Ramadan, Iraq would have been able to take advantage of a very long period in which to prepare for any attack.

It is because of Saddam, not sanctions, that people in Iraq are short of food and their hospitals are short of medicine. Indeed, at the very time when children in Baghdad go hungry, Saddam has been caught exporting convoys of wheat and barley to Syria and Jordan to earn the revenues that keep him and his elite in comfort. Iraq has even sold for export food donated by the rest of world for the needy in Iraq.

As my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has said, it is not an objective of our military action to bring about the downfall of Saddam. It is, though, our objective to weaken the military machine with which Saddam terrorises his own people and protects himself from their need to be rid of him.

For as long as Saddam remains in power, we will remain resolute in our determination that he will not be allowed to fulfil his ambitions to develop weapons of mass terror. The present military operation must bring it home, even to him, that we will not let him get away with his strategy of deceit and obstruction. It would be far better for him, for his regime, for Iraq and for the international community if he now accepted full inspection by the United Nations to carry out the disarmament on the ground that we have been obliged to do from the air.

None of us who have taken part in the decision to take military action has found it easy. It is a decision that we have taken with great reluctance and real regret. However, I am clear that it was the right decision. The regime in Baghdad has demonstrated appalling brutality towards its people. It has demonstrated consistent dishonesty in its promises to the people of the rest of the world. It has persisted in an extensive programme to acquire weapons of terror and the missiles to fire them, for no other reason than to terrorise the rest of the region and beyond.

Military action must be used sparingly and with reluctance, but there are times when we are confronted with such brutality that military force is the only response. This is one of those times. We have shown the resolve to respond. We ask all parties in the House to show the same resolve by giving us their support.

4.56 pm

Mr. Michael Howard (Folkestone and Hythe): I am grateful to the Foreign Secretary for giving me advance sight of his speech.

The House has debated the crisis in Iraq on many previous occasions. This year alone there have been four statements—two by the Prime Minister and two by the Foreign Secretary—two private notice questions and six previous debates. On each of those occasions, the whole House was united in the hope that the grave situation that exists in Iraq could be resolved without military action.

Those hopes have finally been dashed. The responsibility that rested on the shoulders of the Government yesterday, and rests on them today, is awesome. No one who has taken part in a Cabinet decision to authorise military action can be insensitive to the very difficult judgments that have to be made. No burden on Government is more onerous.

Conservative Members offer the Government our support for the action that they have taken. We join with them in the concern that we must all have for the safety of our service men and women who could be in action at any time—indeed, we are told that they are in action as we speak.

We agree with the Government that the cause that they are fighting to uphold is just. What is that cause? It has its roots in the Gulf war. That war was a great achievement, in which British Governments, under the leadership first of my right hon. Friend Baroness Thatcher and then my right hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Mr. Major), played a critical part. It owed much to the skill and valour of British forces, and it was a war in which, once again, they proved themselves to be without equal.

Yet it was an incomplete achievement, because it left in place the rogue regime that had invaded Kuwait and had behaved—and would continue to behave—with such great brutality to its citizens and to others in the region. It left in place a regime that continued to pose a threat to the peace of the region and to humanity.

Mr. Robert N. Wareing (Liverpool, West Derby): Does not the right hon. and learned Gentleman feel a sense of guilt at the fact that he was a member of the Government of Baroness Thatcher who, throughout the war between Iran and Iraq, were supplying arms to Saddam Hussein?

Mr. Howard: I do not accept what the hon. Gentleman says. However, nothing could give Saddam Hussein greater comfort than the House of Commons spending the afternoon debating what may or may not have happened in those years, rather than discussing the cause to which the Government have committed our troops to action today.

At the time of the Gulf war and its aftermath, when that incomplete achievement was in place, the threat posed by the Iraqi regime was something to which the international community was not oblivious. The international community did not simply walk away. The United Nations Security Council passed a resolution to deal with that threat.

[Mr. Howard]

Resolution 687, adopted on 3 April 1991, dealt with the questions that remained to be resolved in the aftermath of the Gulf war. Foremost among them was the need to ensure that Iraq did not use, develop or acquire any weapons of mass destruction, and that any stocks of the materials necessary to create such weapons were eliminated. Iraq, indeed, gave unconditional undertakings to that effect.

The unhappy story of the past seven and a half years has been the story of how the regime of Saddam Hussein has sought at every turn to renege on those undertakings. The consequences are not academic or abstract. The inventory of Scud missiles, chemical missile warheads and live chemical agents, and the capacity to produce biological weapons, testify to the real, practical nature of the danger. Those weapons could destroy whole populations, and the record of this regime is such that it might well use them to destroy whole populations.

It was precisely because the international community was alive to the danger that resolution 687 was passed. It is in that resolution—and in resolution 678, which it expressly affirms—that the basis for the use of force to deal with the danger lies. Those resolutions embody the determination of the international community to hold Saddam Hussein to the undertakings that he gave in 1991. He has repeatedly given solemn pledges that he will honour those undertakings; he has repeatedly broken his pledges.

In October 1997, and again in January 1998, Saddam announced openly his intention to break the agreements made at the end of the Gulf war. Then, in February, he gave a binding commitment to comply. In August this year, he broke that as well, and suspended all but the most routine monitoring. In October, he ceased co-operation entirely.

It was in order to verify the extent to which those undertakings were being kept that UNSCOM was established by the international community. Last month, Saddam Hussein gave a clear and unconditional undertaking to co-operate with UNSCOM. The latest report from the inspectors, however, is indeed a damning document. It makes it clear that the unconditional co-operation that the inspectors were promised barely a month ago has not been forthcoming, and sets out new ways in which their work has been obstructed. Its conclusions were quoted by the Prime Minister and touched on by the Foreign Secretary, but they bear repetition:

"It must regrettably be recorded again that the Commission is not able to conduct substantive disarmament work mandated to it by the Security Council and, thus, to give the Council the assurances it requires with respect to Iraq's prohibited weapons programme."

If, in the face of that conclusion, nothing was done, what would the consequences be? What would the consequences be for the middle east? Would not Saddam Hussein feel able with impunity to ignore all the undertakings that he gave in 1991, and what would the consequences of that be for the safety of the millions of people who inhabit the countries that are neighbours of Iraq? What would the consequences be for the safety of the rest of the world? If one unscrupulous dictator is allowed to treat the international community with such blatant contempt, what authority will remain to deal with others? That is the nature of the choice that the Government faced yesterday, and that is why we support the choice that they made.

It is true that there are bound to be innocent casualties, and no one should be insensitive to the suffering that will occur; but the Iraqi people are already suffering at the hands of Saddam Hussein, and there are times when action of the kind that was taken by the Government is necessary to avoid much greater suffering at a later date.

Inevitably, there are questions that need to be answered. While we understand the inhibitions that exist on the provision of detailed information, I hope that, when he winds up the debate, the Secretary of State for Defence will tell us a little more about the relationship between the military action that is under way, and the objectives that the Government intend to achieve. Is it possible for the right hon. Gentleman to be a little more forthcoming about what the Government hope to accomplish, and how? What are the criteria by which they will measure success? What can the right hon. Gentleman tell us about the Government's long-term strategy—a question which, when it was put by my hon. Friend the Member for Gainsborough (Mr. Leigh), the Foreign Secretary signally failed to answer? Does he agree that the removal of Saddam Hussein from office should be an objective of western policy? Can he tell us about the command arrangements? Will British forces defer to overall United States command? Will there be a right of access to a higher political level, as there was during the Gulf war?

The Foreign Secretary told the House of the welcome support that has been given by other Governments. Can the Secretary of State for Defence tell us what diplomatic efforts have been undertaken to build up support from, particularly, the Arab states? Does the Austrian presidency of the European Union intend to convene a meeting of the General Affairs Council? What action has been taken to protect British citizens and assets that might be subject to attack?

Those are legitimate questions, and I hope that we shall have answers to them that are as full as may be consistent with the requirements of national security. Conservative Members, however, offer the Government support for the action that they have taken. Our thoughts are with our service men and women in the field. They are fighting in a just cause, and they have our full support.

5.7 pm

Mr. Bruce George (Walsall, South): This really is deja vu all over again. We have had debates in the Chamber following earlier crises, and we have seen a pattern of recidivism in the regime in Iraq, against international law, which takes the form of the thwarting of UNSCOM's efforts. UNSCOM has the legitimacy conferred by United Nations Security Council resolution 687 of 1991; it goes about its work; then, as the Prime Minister said, that legitimate work is thwarted.

Then there is the threat of military action. Coalition building takes place; the United Nations intervenes; Kofi Annan goes to Iraq; others sup at the table of the dictators, listening to what they say and believing them. Next, there is the threat of bombing, which, at the last moment, is terminated because Saddam Hussein makes concessions. Many people are then relieved that war has been averted, but those who have studied Saddam Hussein over the years know that this is but a tactical adjustment by a dictator.

Then we start the whole process again, and reach the inevitable point of military threat, followed by the withdrawal of that threat after promises. Again, we are drawn into the same process. I am reminded of the Greek mythological character Sisyphus, who must pursue the endless task of pushing a rock up a hill, pushing it down, pushing it up again and pushing it down again.

Here we are again, but this time the United States and the United Kingdom have the support of others. That support ranges from reasonable enthusiasm to tacit support or, in some cases, the attitude is, "Please carry on. We are delighted that you are doing what you are doing, but do not expect from us either endorsement or military support. We are glad that you are doing it and not us."

Saddam Hussein is very shrewd; however, if he were totally shrewd, he would not be ruling over a country broken not militarily but economically, with a starving population cowed into submission. So, he is not that shrewd, but he is shrewd enough to know how to divide and rule. His goals are simple. One of them is survival—he is a great survivor—and another is that of regional domination and the elimination of any opposition to him, real or imaginary, including those within his own family. He has used trade to sustain support from countries he might need—France and Russia are two obvious examples.

As we have heard, Saddam Hussein has been shrewd in thwarting UNSCOM over the years. Also, despite the sanctions and the international hostility, he has been successful in rebuilding his conventional military capability and in building up and retaining the weapons of mass destruction. Those weapons are not just a threat to Iraq's immediate neighbours, many of whom are not joining any international coalition to protect themselves, but are using surrogates to do the job for them.

Saddam's bluff has been called. It is possible that he thought—this view is shared by people here and in the United States Congress—that the American President was weak and that he could exploit that weakness. There are those who have argued in Congress and outside that there is a crisis, but that the President's first priority is to face his critics at home. I reject that argument.

The critics say that there is no legitimacy for this action, but I believe that it exists. It may be that we have not secured the support of Russia or China, but are we seriously going to say that, although international legitimacy is important, the only time we can take military action, whether it is bilateral action by the United States and the United Kingdom or any potential action by NATO, or, even—I doubt whether this would happen—unilateral military action by the United Kingdom, is when the Security Council in the form of Russia, China or even France give us the go-ahead? I would argue strongly that it is not incumbent on us to wait for that legitimacy. Quite frankly, it has been bestowed anyway.

In case there are any doubters in our midst, I would argue strongly that the speech this afternoon from my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the supporting speech from the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) should have convinced most hon. Members and those outside of the legitimate reasons why the United States Government and the United Kingdom have pursued this course of action.

I do not believe that there are many people here or many in the military who see the prospect of risking death as something to be pursued with high enthusiasm. It would not be wise if, in a cavalier manner, we authorised our armed forces to go into a dangerous military environment for a political and military adventure. We must only risk the lives of the men and women in our armed forces for a cause that is just and in the interests of the international community and the United Kingdom. I believe that those who are not available to be persuaded will never be persuaded, but I believe strongly that there is overwhelming support in the House, if not unanimity, for the Government's actions.

I very much hope that the activities will be terminated in time for the beginning of Ramadan because, like many hon. Members, I have a substantial Muslim minority in my constituency. There is a danger of terrorism and we must all be wary of that, but the point must be made forcefully that the immediate threat posed by Saddam Hussein is not to the United Kingdom or the United States. The immediate danger is posed to Muslims in the region surrounding Iraq. I would not always regard the Governments in those countries with high enthusiasm and I sometimes feel rather disgruntled that we are supporting their survival. They are not necessarily very nice and they are certainly not democratic; however, regional stability is in our interest as well as theirs and it is necessary to take military action.

Of course, it is better if we can threaten action but not use it. However, the ability to threaten diminishes if one is provoked incessantly but force is not used. I suspect that the credibility of the United States, the United Kingdom and the international community which supports our action would have been in tatters if we had not taken action after the violation of agreements signed by Saddam Hussein and after he had, once again, unilaterally discarded them.

Who in their right mind would have regarded anything signed by the Iraqi regime as anything other than tactical, temporary and scheduled for breaking as soon as possible? If there had been a long period of negotiation with our European allies, the Security Council and anyone else concerned, two or three months might have elapsed before any action had been taken. The press and the public would then have said that we were paper tigers—threatening but not delivering. I believe that it was essential to do what we had threatened to do after the last occasion on which UNSCOM's role was made impossible. We said that we would take action without warning or consultation and that is what has happened.

Of course, there are risks, but I believe that it was expedient to take them. I remember being part of a small study group in 1991 after the Gulf war. We produced a book called "Military Lessons of the Gulf War". In that book we said:

> "Another lesson is that wars with limited military aims do not necessarily solve the root problems that brought them about."

I believe that that is as apt today as it was then.

It would be unwise for hon. Members or members of the public to see military action as risk free. There will be a reaction against what has happened, but we must consider the alternatives. It would have been far worse to do nothing than to have pursued the goals for which we are working.

[Mr. Bruce George]

I shall conclude because many hon. Members want to speak. We have historical experience to justify the view that not taking action in the face of threats, violence and breaches of international legitimacy can have devastating consequences. As was said earlier, if the United Kingdom and France, which had the military power and capability to stop Hitler entering the Rheinland in the mid-1930s, had had the will, many of our fathers' lives would have been spared and millions of Jews would have lived. Millions of Germans, Americans, Frenchmen, Belgians and people from all over the world would have enjoyed the rest of their lives, if only the Government at that time had decided that a point had been reached and there was sufficient evidence available to take action to stop Hitler. The consequences of their inaction were devastating, in terms not just of the loss of life and property in the second world war, but of the chain reaction from that war, which created the cold war and the misery and threat of international conflict for decades thereafter. I am not arguing that events in the middle east are necessarily of international proportions, but we have enough experience to know that regional crises can burst beyond that region.

The Government have pursued their goals wisely. Once again, the British armed forces are being called on to support their political masters. It must be said, however, that our armed forces are undergoing further reductions and reorganisation yet again, and are seeing their gross domestic product falling once again. I remind the House of what the last Select Committee on Defence and the present Select Committee, which I am proud to chair, so honestly said: if the House and the Government continue to place demands on our armed forces and to mobilise them into action whenever we decide, and if we decide as a nation to spend less than currently projected on defence, they will not be able to discharge and perform what we task them with.

I greatly hope that we can send a signal to our armed forces, our constituents and the public as a whole that the Government's decision commands wide support. We must be prepared for setbacks and reactions against the decision. I believe that most rational people who stand back coolly and consider the alternative of doing nothing will agree that the consequences of that would be infinitely worse than the action taken yesterday evening, when we asked our armed forces to participate in trying to bring this evil leader to his senses or, at least, severely to constrain his military capability to pursue his objectives.

5.24 pm

Mr. Menzies Campbell (North-East Fife): The hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), who is the Chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, introduced an interesting historical dimension to our debate. I suspect that there will be few new arguments because, in truth, as the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) pointed out, we have dealt with this issue in the House on many occasions this year.

Today we are concerned not so much with the arguments as with the exercise of a judgment. I have already said today that the military action on which the Government have embarked has Liberal Democrat support. I see it as a painful necessity and a last resort when all other options have been exhausted.

None of us has the right to endorse military action as if it were a matter of routine. We must search to be satisfied that military action is justified. In the context of our debate there are two areas in which that search must be carried out. The first is the conduct of Saddam Hussein. Both in the Prime Minister's statement and, to some extent, the Foreign Secretary's speech, and again in the speech of the right hon. and learned Member for Folkstone and Hythe, there was set out the myriad opportunities that Saddam Hussein has had to implement the obligations imposed on him at the end of the Gulf war and to carry out his promises over the approximately eight years since the war ended. If Saddam Hussein's conduct is a reason for military action, we could argue, to adopt the argot of the courtroom, that the case has been proved beyond any reasonable doubt.

The second issue concerns the legal basis for the action. Some say that there is no proper legal basis because there is no single resolution of the United Nations Security Council that authorises the action taken during the past 24 hours. To them I say that, when considering the legal basis of the action, one must have regard to resolutions 687 and 688 with which the Gulf war was brought to an end, to the fact that they reflect voluntary undertakings freely entered into by the Iraqi Government to help bring the war to an end and that since then no resolution of the Security Council in respect of these matters has been anything other than entirely consistent with those obligations. When considering the legal basis of the action we must look at the body of resolutions as a whole and not seek to fasten on to one particular resolution or describe it or any other as deficient.

If Saddam Hussein had shown any willingness to deal with these matters, they would have been resolved long ere now and the people of Iraq would have been allowed to return to what passed for normality in their lives before the Gulf war. We need not be here. We are here because of the intransigence, deception and brinkmanship of Saddam Hussein, because of promises made and not kept, but principally because of the motive of a deliberate effort to maintain the capacity to manufacture chemical and biological weapons.

Why does Saddam Hussein want that capacity? Is it to boast? He is good at that. Is it to swagger? He is good at that, too. It is not those superficial purposes that lie behind this motivation. It is the determination to be the dominant power in the region and to have available weapons of such terror and effect that he can exercise his will throughout the region, destabilise it if he chooses and, indeed, have the capacity to threaten an even wider area.

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): I am grateful to the hon. and learned Gentleman for giving way. This is the closest I can get to intervening on a Minister. Does he agree that the Prime Minister made it clear that we are now embarked on a long strategy of military intervention? That is the likely course of action. Vital to that is support in the Arab world—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I must interrupt the hon. Gentleman and take the opportunity to say that a great many hon. Members wish to speak, so I must require short speeches and short interventions.

Mr. Campbell: If the hon. Gentleman could ensure that I receive the same salary as a Minister, I will ensure that I give way on every occasion on which he wishes to intervene. I shall address strategy later.

Saddam Hussein has had every opportunity to comply, but has chosen not to do so. He has had every opportunity to feed his people and to provide adequate supplies of medicine for them, but the money from the sale of oil has been diverted into replacing the military infrastructure that was so badly damaged in the Gulf war and into the so-called presidential palaces.

When one goes to war, there is always the risk of casualties. In one sense, the Gulf war did a disservice to those of us on the victorious side because the belief grew up that we could engage in modern military combat and that, somehow, that could be done without the downside—or the consequences—of substantial numbers of casualties. There is always a risk of casualties, always the risk of fatality. Pictures of so-called smart weapons filled the television screens in our houses, showing so-called smart bombs going down the chimneys of specified buildings, but they represented a very small fraction of the ordnance that was used. There is no such thing as the infallible weapon, nor is there any such thing as the so-called surgical strike—an expression that contains its own inherent paradox.

No matter how skilled, loyal and professional the crews of the Royal Air Force might be—and they are all of that, as we know—their lives are at risk. Therefore, it must be a matter for sober reflection in the House when we are asked to endorse a decision to put those lives at risk and to test that loyalty, professionalism and skill. It is a question of judgment and that is why we have been sent to the House: to exercise our judgment on behalf of our constituents. I do not believe that my judgment is superior to that of anyone else in the House, but in this matter, my judgment is that the risks to which I have referred are outweighed by the consequences of a successful operation, and more than outweighed by the fact that, if no action is taken, the authority of the United Nations will be for ever affected. Therefore, it is likely that Saddam Hussein's expansionist attitude—to which I have already referred and which lies behind his determination to have weapons of mass destruction—can only be enhanced.

What should be the objectives? They should be to destroy, as far as possible, the capacity to make chemical and biological weapons. We cannot guarantee that we will do that in every respect, but we should do it to the limit and extent of our ability. We should aim to discourage and inhibit any regeneration of that capacity. That is important; Saddam Hussein is a dictator, who has made ingenuity into an art form. We should also aim to inflict serious damage on the military infrastructure that underpins his regime.

The hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) asked me about strategy. If one reads the Prime Minister's statement carefully, one will see that he poses two alternatives. That is indicative of the fact that none of us is able to say here today precisely what the strategy will be after the operations are completed. I shall take what might be described as the worst case—or, perhaps more correctly, the worse case—and hope that I am wrong. I hope that UNSCOM will be restored, but if that is not possible and UNSCOM cannot return to fulfil its remit, the strategy might well have to be one of surveillance, containment and deterrence. Let us remind ourselves that in the Gulf war deterrence worked. When it became clear that Saddam Hussein might contemplate the use of weapons of mass destruction—as we now know, to a greater extent even than we believed—the response of Mr. James Baker, then the Secretary of State for the United States responsible for the majority of the negotiations with Mr. Tariq Aziz, was to say that, if there was any use of weapons of mass destruction, it would be met with a disproportionate response. Such a lack of specification is the very essence of deterrence.

In the debates of 1990 and 1991, there were often highly charged moments, such as those that have occurred today. Those debates, like today's debate, involved questions of judgment and the assessment of risk. They certainly involved anxiety about the consequences of war and the understandable reluctance of Members of the House to expose our forces to the perils of modern warfare. As we now know from the efforts of UNSCOM, the risk of chemical, biological and nuclear attack was much greater than we had known or understood. In those debates, I consistently voted to support the Government of the day in the action in which they were engaged. I believe that the House was right to do that then and I believe that it is again right to support Her Majesty's Government today in the action to which they have set their hand.

5.36 pm

Mr. Tony Benn (Chesterfield): I think that this is the sixth war that I have heard debated in the House: the Korean war was going on when I was elected; and on the day that I was elected, President Truman threatened to use atomic weapons in Korea. It was much to Clement Attlee's credit that he flew straight to Washington and warned Truman off. During debates about Suez, I heard Eden comparing Nasser with Hitler, just as many hon. Members have compared Saddam Hussein with Hitler.

The truth is that chairborne troops, who sit here planning strategy with their marvellous knowledge of military matters, are the ones who can betray the troops. The most scandalous thing that can be done is to commit troops to a war that is wrong and then shield behind them, saying that because they are on the front line we must never criticise. Our duty to the troops is to see that they are never put in a position in which they are endangered by being outside the law.

I shall be brief because I made many of the points that I shall make today when we last debated the matter. Article 46 of the United Nations charter states:

> "Plans for the application of armed force shall be made by the Security Council with the assistance of the Military Staff Committee."

It is no good saying that a resolution that is seven years old provides a permanent permission for anyone in the UN to go to war. It is absolute nonsense and no one believes it for a moment. The plan to use armed force was not a decision taken by the Security Council. Why? It is because the Government and the American Government knew that they would never get the support of the Security Council. Israel has been protected by God knows how many vetoes—27, I was told when I asked the UN office in London. The Americans always veto to protect Israel: they make that their business. However, Russia, China and perhaps France would have protected Iraq for their own reasons.

[Mr. Tony Benn]

I do not want to rely too much on texts, but, a few years ago, the leader of the party of which I am a member insisted that we had a new clause in our constitution. I looked it up; it states:

"Labour is committed . . . to the United Nations . . . to secure peace, freedom, democracy".

It is with regret that I say to my colleagues that I am deeply affronted by what has been done. We talk about ethical foreign policy; this is an unethical thing to do. Why? Because wholly innocent people will be killed. Let us not pretend that, just because Saddam has killed people, we can do the same. We have killed far more Iraqis than Saddam has: we killed 200,000 during the Gulf war. That argument is not credible.

I received about 100 telephone calls during last night, many of which were from people who had voted Labour and who expressed—not hostility or anger of the kind that I might be expressing—but a sense of disappointment because they did not think that a Labour Government would break the charter of the UN to go along with the President of the United States.

Mr. Alan Simpson (Nottingham, South): Regarding international legitimacy and the United Nations, will my right hon. Friend confirm that UNSCOM is not the child of the United States, or even of ourselves? It is the creation of the United Nations and, as such, should have reported back to the Security Council for a Security Council decision on that report. The failure to do that will almost certainly guarantee that UNSCOM will never be allowed to return to Iraq, whatever the consequences of the bombings.

Mr. Benn: That is true, but then the British and American Governments now call themselves "the international community". They sometimes call themselves "the west" or "the allies". Whatever they call themselves, Britain and America are the only two nations in the world participating in this action. Other countries may try to be friendly—the Arab countries do not want to upset Washington—but the reality is that, even if people understand it, Britain and the US have no support whatever for the bombing that they have undertaken.

The hypocrisy upsets me. The Americans killed 1 million people in Vietnam. The Americans tried to kill Castro and invaded Cuba. We did the same—I say "we", but it was not me—when Sir Anthony Eden ordered the assassination of Nasser. The operation failed because it was handled incompetently—like many security operations. The American Government reported Mandela to the apartheid regime. American Governments have supported some of the most corrupt and dictatorial regimes in the world. When I hear President Clinton speak, I am not prepared to see him with wings and a halo. The United States is a super-power, just like Britain was in the 19th century. In this action, we are witnessing a return of Victorian imperialism. The only difference is that Britain is so weak we have to piggyback on top of an American military superpower.

Mr. Christopher Leslie (Shipley): What credible alternative strategy does my right hon. Friend offer for disarming Saddam Hussein?

Mr. Benn: I ask my hon. Friend to consider this: if one does something illegal, it is no good saying, "Well, what else could I do?" It is an illegal action. The answer is simple: the sanctions should be lifted. I am asked to believe the Prime Minister, but the imposition of sanctions has not stopped Saddam re-arming.

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): How will that stop Saddam?

Mr. Benn: Sanctions have not had any effect except on the Iraqi people. *[Interruption.]* Please do not shout at me, I am entitled to make my case. I have listened to my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) and I shall be sorry when he leaves the House. The world community agrees unanimously that the sanctions are a grave injustice that affect innocent people.

Let us look at the other side of the coin—I do not know whether I am allowed to mention it. Today, the five Law Lords apparently moved to allow another filthy dictator to return home. I wonder what image the world will have of Britain when we bomb the people of Iraq and plan to let Pinochet go home. If this is cool Britannia, modern Britain and the millennium dome, let us have another look at it.

Mr. Robathan *rose—*

Mr. Benn: I will not give way again as I promised to be brief.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: I have a very important intervention.

Mr. Benn: I promised that I would speak briefly.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) is not going to give way, and he is entitled to refuse to do so.

Mr. Benn: It is a difficult thing to vote against one's own Government in the House of Commons when the overwhelming majority of hon. Members want the bombing, favour the bombing and praise the bombing. I think it is wrong and I will not apologise to the House for that. People woke up today and discovered that they are widows, orphans and parentless as a result of last night's bombing—and it will happen again. The last time we bombed Iraq, Saddam got stronger; the time before that, Saddam got stronger. This is not the way to deal with the situation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George)—who has now left the House—talked about Munich and all that. There was no appeasement before the war: Neville Chamberlain supported Hitler. If hon. Members look at the captured German Foreign Office documents, they will see that Lord Halifax went to Berchtesgarten and said to Hitler, "Herr Hitler, on behalf of the British Government, I want to congratulate you on obliterating communism in Germany and acting as a bulwark against it in the Soviet Union." The history must be read again.

We armed Saddam and we cut Kuwait away from Iraq. The Americans provided Iraq with chemical weapons—it is all recorded—and they supported Saddam to the hilt. We must be careful that we are not swept away on a

media wave, where every bombing is a spectacle. The news media switch from the test match in Australia to Baghdad burning. The hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) and I were on a television programme last night. We heard the questions: "Come on, is that a bomb or a missile? What do you think?" A pilot was asked, "How did you feel when you went in and bombed?"

It is a defiance of human nature to try to resolve matters in that way. The world is more dangerous than it was because anyone can make chemical weapons. The super-powers have nuclear weapons, but any country can have chemical weapons. The more dangerous the world becomes, the more important it is to stick to the rule of law. However attractive and popular this action is with the media—*The Guardian* says that it was done to help the poor Iraqis—the reality is that, once we depart from our responsibility to the United Nations charter, we are moving into the world of the jungle. In that world, there are many dangerous animals, and we must not think that we can just deal with Saddam and everyone else. Our children will not thank us for what we decide today because the consequences will live with them long after we have gone.

5.45 pm

Mr. Tom King (Bridgwater): There is a certain repetition in these debates, and one feature of them is that I often follow the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). I listened to his anti-American outburst over Vietnam. The right hon. Gentleman then swept aside the Law Lords over Pinochet and moved on to Munich and whether Neville Chamberlain supported Hitler. I was reminded of the three-card trick in which our attention is drawn to other things. The hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie) raised the real issue and punctured the wonderful performance by the right hon. Gentleman. With the greatest respect, the right hon. Gentleman fell apart completely when asked what he would do.

Mr. Benn *rose—*

Mr. King: If the right hon. Gentleman will allow me, I will develop my argument.

There are three real distinctions. The right hon. Gentleman participated in the Gulf war debate and voted against military action. If the right hon. Gentleman had had his way, Saddam would still be in Kuwait, and other countries would have undoubtedly collapsed under his forces. I will not discuss the torture or the number of casualties in Kuwait or the many Kuwaitis who are still missing as a result of Iraq's action.

My experience predates the Gulf war. I met Saddam Hussein in 1982 when, as a Minister in the Department of the Environment, I led an export mission to Iraq. I saw the police state at first hand. I was not surprised to learn recently that every prisoner incarcerated for a certain length of time had been executed when Iraqi prisons became overcrowded. The nature and obscenity of this regime totally differ from anything that the world has seen.

Mr. Benn *rose—*

Mr. King: If the right hon. Gentleman will allow me, I should like to continue.

That might not matter and we might have to tolerate it if it were a purely domestic matter for the people of Iraq—awful as that would be. However, the reality is that it is not an internal matter. Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman's other theory is that the weapons of mass destruction and the programmes to develop nuclear, chemical and biological weapons are a product of the imaginations of the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary and of the previous Prime Minister and the previous Foreign Secretary. Perhaps he discounts all the evidence of the United Nations agencies and UNSCOM, which—as the Foreign Secretary pointed out in his speech—have identified the awful nature of weapons that could, in the wrong hands, destroy the world.

This is a serious issue. Governments can embark on pretty stupid programmes of expenditure so long as they confine them within their own territory. Those countries that have developed weapons are usually under democratic control and the international community is reasonably confident that they will not be mad enough to use them. The trouble is that Saddam Hussein not only is developing the capability of weapons of a quite awful nature but has used them on occasion. The international consequences could be extremely grave.

This is unfinished business. I apologise to the right hon. Gentleman if he wished to engage me on this point, but I do not have time to discuss it as other hon. Members wish to speak in the debate. I am satisfied with the legal basis for the action. Solemn undertakings were given and they were endorsed, accepted and authorised by United Nations resolutions, which the hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) spelled out clearly. Those undertakings were given at the meeting at the tented camp—I forget its name—where General Schwarzkopf, Crown Prince Khaled and General de la Billiere met the Iraqi generals sent by Saddam Hussein to seek a ceasefire. They did not say that the weapons of mass destruction did not exist; they accepted that the weapons existed and gave the most solemn undertaking that not only would they destroy the weapons but they would no longer develop fresh weapons to replace them. This is therefore unfinished business.

In 1991, we were right to proceed through UNSCOM and agree on the peaceful identification of weapons, with the solemn promise that Iraq would co-operate in their destruction. The seven-year history of that process is one of continual obstruction and deception, which has been testified to by Saddam Hussein's son-in-law, who was responsible for the programme and was subsequently executed by his brother-in-law, with or without Saddam's specific instruction. The son-in-law made it clear that there was an organised, deliberate campaign of deception. UNSCOM has made considerable progress against that campaign. The problem now is that UNSCOM is getting too close to the heart of the matter, which is why the obstruction has become more and more serious.

Against that background, we cannot simply walk away, say that the situation is too difficult to tackle—it is certainly extremely difficult—and let the monster develop his programme, which would grow and grow, along with his influence and the threat that he poses. As my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard) said, if we did nothing, the authority of the United Nations and order in the world would be totally undermined and there would be a total subversion of order in that region. If that is the case, we have no choice, but it is an extremely difficult choice.

[Mr. King]

Our decision carries with it heavy responsibilities, including a responsibility to the people of Iraq, who have suffered all too much. We have a responsibility to try to ensure in every way possible that civilian casualties are kept to a minimum. I suspect that we shall get no help in that from Saddam Hussein, who may be actively engaged in trying to ensure that there are suitable civilian casualties. As we know from his other activities, he has little concern about the lives of many of his people. There will be civilian casualties, but I hope and believe that it will be possible to minimise them.

We have a responsibility to our armed forces, whom we have asked to undertake this most difficult of tasks. I strongly support my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond, Yorks (Mr. Hague), the Leader of the Opposition, who said that there must be the clearest rules of engagement and exact terms for this difficult undertaking. There must also be the closest understanding with the United States about those rules of engagement and the objectives of our actions.

It is important to spell out objectives because it will be vital, in the House and outside, to maintain—as we succeeded in doing during the Gulf war—overwhelming public support and understanding for our actions. That will be an enormous challenge. The Foreign Secretary and the Government pride themselves on their media skills. Anyone who has been in a studio today will know the sort of media frenzy that develops on such issues. Many channels and wavelengths are at work and press conferences are being held in capitals around the world.

The problem is to ensure that messages are clear, that there is no confusion and that rumour is not allowed to spread, but we face a dictator and an organisation that are masters of propaganda and misinformation and will be seeking to organise dissent in the Arab world and more widely. There is also the problem of countries that are not always sure of their support for actions such as ours. France has been mentioned. I recall that three weeks passed after the invasion of Kuwait, before France, with the more positive leadership of President Mitterrand, decided to act, and we welcomed its support. Historically, France and Iraq have a relationship that is different from that between Britain and Iraq, and we must recognise that.

We face the difficulty of ensuring good communications and avoiding misunderstanding. There have already been suggestions that what the Chief of the Defence Staff said today was not entirely consistent with what President Clinton said last night. That can be explained and the differences are not as great as some members of the media might believe. However, if there is not the clearest statement and harmonisation of view, approach and objective between ourselves and the United States, the whole venture on which we have embarked will be threatened.

We are only just starting on this venture. The challenge lies ahead and is peculiar, because of the incidence of Ramadan. The whole world understands that the initial venture is likely to be short-lived. It will be followed by a period of reflection and assessment conducted by ourselves and Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi leadership. The issue will be to try to determine what will happen.

Obviously, what should happen is that we revert to the UNSCOM approach of the peaceful and orderly destruction of the weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein and his regime committed themselves to that approach and are bound to it by their understandings with the UN and those reached during their recent meeting with Kofi Annan, the Secretary-General of the United Nations. However, we must all recognise the concerns about whether that is a realistic option. Will the inspectors be able to return? Will they be able to resume and continue their work, or will their task be made even more difficult by the interruption? Will they be welcome?

There is an alternative, and the Defence Secretary may want to comment on this when he winds up the debate. I was interested in the Prime Minister's comments, which pointed to a continuing programme of degradation of Saddam's military capability and the clearest warning to him that he will not be allowed to recover from the damage that he suffers in this campaign and that any attempt to rebuild his defences will be similarly dealt with.

That statement is correct and must be made, because Saddam Hussein must now be sent the message that this action is not a slap on the wrist. We are not saying that we are fed up, that we shall express our impatience through this action and that we shall then let the matter drop. We have now embarked on a process that we must continue, one way or another, until the weapons of mass destruction are removed. Nothing else would be safe for the region or the world. The process will not be easy or without pain. Obviously, that pain most directly threatens the sad, unfortunate people of Iraq, but it is no secret that our action also puts at risk British interests, British lives and British assets.

We know of terrorist groups in the world and we know of exploitation by Saddam Hussein of terrorist groups. If we are undertaking—as it is right to do—a responsibility on behalf of a safer world order in the future, we may have to pay a price. We must be as careful, orderly and steady as we can during this difficult process. Things will go wrong. There will be every attempt to mislead the public and to pretend that this action was unnecessary. The speeches and interventions that we have already heard give us a clear picture of the arguments that will seduce some people who think that there must be an easy way. We have made the hardest choice; that is the route on which we have embarked and I believe that we must now see it through.

5.59 pm

Mr. Donald Anderson (Swansea, East): I well understand the wish of the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) to keep public opinion on side in this operation. He cited the example of what happened in 1990-91, but this operation is surely more difficult than the one undertaken at that time, when it was possible to have a clear-cut aim. That aim was to expel the aggressor—Iraq—from Kuwait. This time, there is no absolute, certain aim for the short term.

All that we can say is that we want to destroy to the maximum Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction and his capacity to build more. It will be a much longer process than that of 1990-91. However, I agree with the right hon. Member for Bridgwater, who made a wise speech, showing his experience. It was not frenzied, gung-ho or enthusiastic, and that same tone characterised most of the other speeches that we have heard today. It contained a recognition of the risks to our

airmen who, as the Prime Minister said, are probably still in the air and still risking their lives. It also contained a recognition of the risk to civilians on the Iraqi side, so we proceed not with enthusiasm but with regret and a recognition of the dangers. However, there is also a recognition of the principles involved.

I hope that the House is sending a very clear message of the overwhelming all-party support for the action that the Government have taken and that my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister set forth so responsibly earlier today. The speeches made by the Leader of the Opposition, the shadow Foreign Secretary and the hon. and learned Member for North–East Fife (Mr. Campbell), who speaks for the Liberal Democrats, show that there is an all-party coalition, and rightly so, telling the dictator that he has gone too far and that this country and this Parliament overwhelmingly support the action of the Government and our allies.

I shall not repeat the history of the situation, because the Prime Minister clearly set out its genesis in 1990–91 and the unfinished business before us. We can perhaps pick up the history in the two crises that developed earlier this year. The first, in February, almost led to the launch of an air attack on Iraq, but Kofi Annan then visited Baghdad. A Security Council resolution made it clear that Saddam Hussein's actions would have the "severest consequences", which could only mean military consequences, if he again failed to comply with the promises that he had made.

A second crisis developed with Saddam Hussein's further obstruction, which culminated in November when he again broke his solemn and binding promises almost as soon as they were made. We issued a threat, similar to that which had been made in February, that, if there was clear evidence of obstruction, there would be no warning and we would launch an air attack.

The evidence is crystal clear. It was provided in the United Nations Special Commission's report, not by one senior inspector but by all UNSCOM inspectors who had experienced Saddam's obstruction. A warning was given in very clear terms that, if Saddam Hussein's promises were broken, and if there was evidence that they had been broken, there would inevitably be an air attack.

We would have looked foolish and lacked credibility if we had not responded, if we had got to the point of being about to launch our missiles again, only for there to be yet another United Nations visit and yet another promise from Saddam Hussein, along the lines of, "You know me; next time I'll do better." Such an outcome would have had the most unfortunate consequences, not only for this operation but for the credibility of the international community in other forums—in Kosovo, for example. It is clear that we could not simply continue to bow to the promises of Saddam Hussein.

There is no easy solution when dealing with Saddam Hussein. Inaction would not have been satisfactory. Indeed, it would have sent a clear signal to Saddam Hussein that he could do what he liked and get away with it, and we would have lost all credibility. However, the military option has serious implications and raises many questions about the nature of the international mandate. Ultimately, NATO, the west or the international community cannot always await a specific endorsement from the United Nations and cannot always expect to wait for China, or any other permanent member of the Security Council, to agree. The window of opportunity was limited because Ramadan starts this weekend, and I certainly do not accept that domestic matters in the United States were relevant in this context.

Clearly, all actions can have adverse consequences. All are dangerous and all must be entered into with great caution, but it is the least undesirable option to say that there is clear evidence that promises have been broken, and to act accordingly. Every diplomatic possibility of dealing with Saddam Hussein has been exhausted.

There will almost certainly be some success in the short term, but where do we go from here? The key question is, "Where now?" If, as is likely, a substantial part—perhaps the greater part—of Saddam Hussein's capacity and materiel is destroyed, it is still unlikely that the UNSCOM inspectors will be allowed back into Iraq. We shall then have to rely on signals intelligence, human intelligence, defectors, aerial surveillance and so on. It will be much more difficult to monitor what is happening.

The official objectives are clear—to reduce Saddam's capability to use and build weapons of mass destruction and to diminish the threat that he poses to his region. We shall almost certainly achieve those objectives in the short and medium term, but he will still be there. So long as he is, the threat will continue—we must be ready to counter it as and when necessary.

All that we can hope to do during that time is, first, to isolate Saddam within his own region and to build on the reasonable consensus that exists in the Arab states. Secondly, we must use monitoring to contain his capacity to cause mayhem for his neighbours. It will not be easy. The outlook is somewhat bleak, and there are no simple solutions. All that we can do is affirm our clear commitment to ensuring that Saddam Hussein does not go unrestrained, and work with the forces in the region to ensure regional stability.

Had we done nothing at this time, which was the alternative, we should have lost credibility and simply encouraged Saddam Hussein. I am confident that the overwhelming majority of hon. Members will join the all-party coalition and support the Government's clear action.

6.9 pm

Sir John Stanley (Tonbridge and Malling): There are three compelling propositions, all of which are overwhelmingly demonstrable, for supporting the Government's key decision. First, it is now wholly demonstrable that the word of Saddam Hussein is absolutely worthless, that his protestations of innocence are worthless, that his assurances of compliance are worthless, and that his written undertakings, even including those made directly to the Secretary-General of the United Nations, are worthless. Against that background, one must recognise that, in dealing with Saddam Hussein, the only truth is reality. The reality is that established most particularly by UNSCOM, which demonstrates what is on the ground. I am very glad that the Government have been guided by the reality and not by Saddam Hussein's protestations or written assurances.

The second proposition is that it is now clearly demonstrable that Saddam Hussein's almost single-minded objective is to acquire, retain and conceal weapons of mass destruction. We know for a fact that he has such weapons, and that he has used them—internally

[Sir John Stanley]

in Iraq and externally in the Iran-Iraq war, which, it is worth recalling, was started by the Iraqis and resulted in the greatest number of casualties of any war since 1945. Saddam Hussein is clearly absolutely bent on obtaining those weapons of mass destruction.

Therefore, I personally very much welcome one of the Government's decisions. In a previous incarnation on the Government Front Bench in the 1980s, I received all the material about the Iraqi programme of weapons of mass destruction. It was, without exception, covered by very high security classification. The Government have been absolutely right to declassify and place in the public domain significant amounts of that material. It is essential that, in the House and the wider public, people are fully aware of the horrendous nature of the weapons that Saddam Hussein is bent on acquiring, the capabilities of those weapons and the scale of his programme.

I welcome the fact that every hon. Member received a letter dated 10 November, under the signatures of the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), and the Minister for the Armed Forces, to which was attached a quite detailed paper which set out Saddam Hussein's activities in his programme of weapons of mass destruction.

The third proposition that is wholly demonstrable is that Saddam Hussein is not only concerned with the acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, but determined to try to find opportunities to use them. The fact that he has been testing missile technology carrying chemical warheads, as has been confirmed in several research laboratories, makes it clear that such weapons of mass destruction are potentially available for use well beyond Iraqi boundaries. Against that background, it is compellingly clear that Saddam Hussein must be stopped—and stopped at this point.

That brings me to one of the key elements in the equation, to which the hon. Member for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson) referred: the position of UNSCOM. UNSCOM's surveillance capability is undoubtedly far greater than anything that can be achieved by any other means. Under the powers given to it in UN resolutions, it can go where it wishes in Iraq, providing that Saddam Hussein adheres to the resolutions' ambit. UNSCOM teams can enter facilities and buildings; they are certainly not confined simply to external inspection. By their very nature, the teams can get as close as necessary in order to conduct visual inspection of any item of equipment or material that they want to examine. That is a key capability, and unique to a system of inspection on the ground.

I join wholly with praise in all parts of the House for the capabilities, professionalism and bravery of our armed forces. I also pay tribute to members of the UNSCOM inspection teams, which, in extremely challenging circumstances, have done a most remarkable job in uncovering Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and securing their destruction on an enormous scale. I believe that hon. Members in all parts of the House are very grateful for, and appreciative of, what those teams have achieved.

Mr. Robert Key (Salisbury): May I echo what my right hon. Friend has just said? Does he agree that much of UNSCOM's success is due to the critical role played by our scientists in Porton Down, who have been members of UNSCOM from day one? Does he also agree that the work of the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment and the Centre for Applied Microbiology and Research at Porton Down are crucial to the enterprise's success?

Sir John Stanley: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who is right to highlight the significant British contribution in research facilities and some personnel, which has made a material and beneficial impact on the work of UNSCOM teams.

As critical as UNSCOM is, the key point must be made that some have argued—in this debate and outside the House—that hostilities should never occur in order that UNSCOM teams might remain in Iraq. I shall deal with that argument head on. It is not valid if UNSCOM teams are no longer able to do their work. If they are neutralised, that argument falls. Having looked through the paper of 15 December, which Richard Butler submitted to the Secretary-General of the UN—the Government helpfully placed it in the Library yesterday—I am in no doubt that UNSCOM inspection teams are being drastically neutralised. We simply cannot allow UNSCOM to become a token force, simply a flag-waving exercise for the UN or a body that goes only to several declared sites and ignores entirely undeclared sites.

We all know the position in the declared sites; the Foreign Secretary made it clear earlier in the debate. They are so heavily sanitised that, by the time UNSCOM arrives, they are—proverbially—reeking with Dettol as a result of the clearance of anything that may be remotely incriminating. We can therefore no longer rely on UNSCOM inspections. That leaves the Government with only two alternatives: to abandon any attempt to contain the awfulness of Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction programme, or take the action that they have taken.

With all my colleagues in all parts of the House, I wholly support the Government's action. I am saddened—I am not critical because every hon. Member has the right to form his own view and divide the House if he so chooses—that, apparently, there will be a Division at the end of the debate. I hope that support for the Government will be overwhelming. I am in no doubt that, like one or two others this century, Saddam Hussein is far too dangerous and far too evil not to be stopped right now.

6.20 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley): I especially agree with the last remarks of the right hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley).

I declare an interest. I chair an organisation called Indict, which was set up to bring Saddam Hussein and his associates before an international criminal court. Some other hon. Members are part of Indict. I want Saddam and his colleagues to remain alive to sit before that court and answer the charges of war crimes, crimes against humanity and genocide.

The United States Congress has voted us $3 million to carry out that task. It has also passed the Iraqi National Liberation Act, with the intention of helping the Iraqi opposition to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein—an aim with which I profoundly agree.

Although I am sure that no one in the House wants to see a country bombed—I certainly do not, with my long record in the peace movement—I must tell the House, with profound distress, that in the circumstances I see no option but to do so. The people who have criticised that option have come up with no alternatives. How does one cause a country to comply with UN resolutions? No one has answered that question.

The UN resolutions are endless. For example, there are resolutions 687, 707, 715, 949, 1060, 1115, 1134, 1137 and 678. Most of those resolutions are continually being broken by the present regime in Iraq. It is often forgotten that one of those resolutions calls for an end to the repression of Iraqi citizens, yet Kurds are continually being deported from the parts of Iraq controlled by Saddam Hussein.

I did not realise what was going on, because unfortunately such information does not get out of Iraq. When I was there in 1995, I found that, in the previous three months, 2,000 Iraqi citizens who happened to be Kurds had been kicked out of Kirkuk. Two thousand had been forced into northern Iraq. They had 24 hours to get out of their homes in the areas controlled by Saddam Hussein. That is ethnic cleansing by anyone's definition, and that ethnic cleansing is not a one-off; it is a continuous aim of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Many mentions have been made of the latest report of the UN special rapporteur on human rights. I have followed those reports over the years. Depressingly, year after year, the report is the same. There have been very few improvements in human rights in Iraq since the UN special rapporteur started reporting.

Recently, I attended a conference at which I heard ordinary Iraqis speak about torture in Iraq. One Iraqi spoke about gross violations of human rights, including extra-judicial killings, torture, arbitrary detention, disappearances, mass murder, the use of chemical weapons in Halabja and elsewhere, the mass deportation of 2 million Kurds, the establishment of 110 concentration camps, the destruction of 4,500 Kurdish and Assyrian villages, the laying of thousands of mines, deforestation, drainage of the Arab marshlands, repression of the Shi'ites and some formerly loyal Sunni tribes, discrimination against and oppression of the Assyro-Chaldean and Turkoman minorities, state-directed rape, thalium poisoning, scientific experimentation on prisoners, execution campaigns, state-supported terrorism and the destruction of religious and cultural property.

Dr. Al Hakim of the Organisation of Human Rights in Iraq described numerous atrocities, including those of dissolving bodies in nitric acid, submerging prisoners in septic tanks, forcing them to sit on broken bottles, piercing their tongues with needles and roasting them over a fire. Such atrocities are not consigned to the past; they are facts of life in Iraq today.

In 1991, I and others stood on the mountains and saw the Kurds, who fled in their thousands across snow-covered mountains in scanty clothing with no shoes on their feet. They died in their thousands because Saddam Hussein chased them out of their own country. I shall never forget being approached, in the sleet and snow, by women who pushed bundles at me. The bundles were dead babies. Nor shall I forget taking an all-party group of Members to a London hospital to see some of the victims of Halabja: people who could not speak because their insides had been burnt, and people who showed the wounds on their bodies. All those were victims of Saddam Hussein's oppression.

Mr. Harry Cohen (Leyton and Wanstead): Of course those human rights abuses are abhorrent, but is it not also the case that 7,000 people are dying from sanctions-related causes? That has been said by Dennis Halliday, who for 32 years was the UN official concerned. My hon. Friend spoke about the alternative. Does she not believe that there should be an alternative to the death of 7,000 people a month—many of them babies? Will she say what the next step is—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman has had a good innings.

Ann Clwyd: My hon. Friend knows that I agree with him on many things. However, I do not agree with him on this issue, because he obviously has not read the special rapporteur's report in detail. The special rapporteur says:

> "Insofar as the 'oil-for-food' programme has been implemented in a discriminatory and not fully equitable or efficient manner, the Special Rapporteur observes that the Government of Iraq is solely responsible for the distribution programme."

Moreover, he says that, for five years, the Government of Iraq refused to comply with UN resolutions in the oil-for-food programme. For five years, when the people of Iraq could have been receiving food and medicines, the Government of Iraq turned down that opportunity. The people who have imposed the sanctions are not responsible for the wretchedness of the people of Iraq. Saddam Hussein and his regime are solely responsible for the situation of his own people.

I believe that, while Saddam Hussein and that rotten regime remain in being, the people will continue to suffer. I have no patience with those who apologise for that regime, because the facts are there for everyone to see. I am afraid that, while he persists, the situation of the people in Iraq will continue to deteriorate, because that is his wish. It gives him the opportunity to disseminate propaganda. I am very sorry that some of my hon. Friends, whom I respect in so many other ways, have been duped by that propaganda, because some of the pictures that have appeared were obviously carefully arranged by Saddam Hussein for the media. The media cannot roam at will in Baghdad or any other part of Iraq. The Government of Iraq ensure that the media are taken to those pictures that they want them to see. Please do not tell me that there is a free press in Iraq, because there is not.

In the north, there is an opportunity to see what sanctions do. For me, there can be no argument against lifting the sanctions for the liberated part of Iraq. Why should the liberated part, which holds no truck with Saddam Hussein, still suffer the impact of those sanctions? It is suffering not only United Nations sanctions but sanctions imposed by Saddam Hussein against it. It is the subject of a double set of sanctions.

It is tragic that for so long the Iraqi opposition outside Iraq has not been fully supported. I should like to see a programme other than one-off bombings, although I do not criticise the bombings, as I have made clear. The bombings must be linked with a longer-term programme which obviously has to include a way of assisting the Iraqi

[Ann Clwyd]

opposition to bring about the downfall of Saddam Hussein and his regime. The Americans have made it clear that aim of the Iraqi National Liberation Act, which was passed in both the Congress and the Senate, and for which money has been appropriated, is to bring about the downfall of Saddam Hussein by arming the opposition and giving them other assistance. I agree with that aim because I do not believe that there can be any future for the people of Iraq while that regime remains in being.

Nor do I believe that there can be safety for Saddam's neighbours or for the rest of the world while he is capable of using those weapons of mass destruction that UNSCOM, time after time, has said he still has in his grasp. It is our responsibility to make sure that those weapons of mass destruction are eliminated from his armoury. But again I say that that is not enough on its own: there has to be a longer-term plan. I criticise Governments all over the world who have paid lip service to destroying the regime of Saddam Hussein for not giving more support to the Iraqi opposition. The Iraqi National Congress has the capability of providing the type of opposition and force that can bring Saddam Hussein down, but it needs assistance.

Mr. Robathan: Does the hon. Lady think that part of the assistance that Britain can give is to ensure that the Arabic service of the BBC World Service portrays the position of the British and American Governments? The World Service is very much listened to by the people of Iraq who dare to do so. There are reports, which I cannot substantiate, that undue notice is taken of people in this country who oppose the British Government; yet we can see from the House today that they are but few.

Ann Clwyd: I am afraid that one of my hon. Friends made a lot of noise just as the hon. Gentleman was finishing his remarks and I did not catch the end of them.

Mr. Robathan: My point is that there are reports that, when the Arabic service of the BBC—I fear that few of us speak Arabic—broadcasts to Iraq, it gives undue prominence to the opponents of British Government policy. Both sides should be heard, but should not the Government exert some influence on the BBC to ensure that British Government policy is heard on the World Service?

Ann Clwyd: I do not have the facility to understand the Arabic service of the World Service, but clearly a number of views ought to be broadcast. I am sure that the hon. Gentleman will make his view clear to the BBC World Service and get that put right.

I ask this question of people who oppose this action: how do we get countries to adhere to United Nations resolutions? I want the UN to work. I do not want people to scoff at the UN because it passes resolution after resolution. I do not want Saddam Hussein to raise two fingers to the UN and play cat and mouse with UNSCOM and everyone else. He had been told repeatedly that, unless he abided by the resolutions, unfortunately further action would be taken without warning. That is precisely what has happened in this case.

Max van der Stoel, the UN rapporteur, shows in his report that the number of people assassinated this year in Iraq for their political views has reached four figures. That is the nature of Iraq and that is the blood running down the streets of Baghdad. If people want to be emotional about this, let them have the truth. The Iraqi regime has used its weapons against its own people and killed tens of thousands of them. Until we eliminate those weapons, there can be no safety for any of us from Saddam Hussein.

6.35 pm

Mr. Martin Bell (Tatton): I wish to speak briefly and from the heart about a few things that I think I know about. I can claim more personal experience than most of the nature of modern warfare, and that experience causes me a great deal of trouble at a time like this. We talk about the degradation of the Iraqis' capability. That carries me back about eight years to the Saudi desert, when I found myself in uniform with the Queen's Royal Irish Hussars attached to 7 Armoured Brigade, preparing to go to war against Iraq. Up ahead of us, the allies were conducting a six-week bombardment campaign from the air. The reports and briefing notes came back saying that the capability was being degraded. At the same time, the antennae of the intelligence unit alongside us were picking up desperate calls from the Iraqis for anything with four wheels to come and take out their dead and wounded.

We have to realise that we are talking here about people. There will be casualties—we do not know how great. There is no such thing as a cost-free conflict. This is going to cost. Against that background, I have two concerns. One is about the timing of this action. It is legitimate to look back over the past 12 months and ask whether the escalation of the American rhetoric has coincided with the time of the President's trouble. It certainly did in February and it does now. Let us say that it is a coincidence.

I will go on to my second concern. Study the silences. I urge all right hon. and hon. Members to study the speeches that have not been made and the actions that have not been taken. Where is the support in the Arab world, the United Nations and the world community at large of the kind that we enjoyed seven and eight years ago? It was an enormous comfort to the soldiers of the Queen's Royal Irish Hussars when they went to war to know that they were part of a great coalition that included Arab contingents. The Egyptians were there, the Saudis were there, even the Syrians were there, the Kuwaitis were there. Now that is not so.

People say that business was left undone. It was not. The business was done. The business was to throw the Iraqis out of Kuwait. That was the mandate. Only the British, Americans and French in that coalition actually set foot in Iraq. So that was done. Now we face a really difficult situation, in which we are in danger, if not of acting as, of being perceived as the deputy sheriff of the world, with the United States as the sheriff. We have to think this through. We need more information from our Government than we have received. We need to have the notes of which the Prime Minister spoke this afternoon so that we can be convinced that we are doing the correct thing. I have grave doubts about it.

I sit in this House as the only elected Independent. I vote with the Government much more often than against them. On the whole, they are a good Government. On most issues, they serve the people well. I cannot support this enterprise.

6.39 pm

Mr. Tam Dalyell (Linlithgow): Like the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), I was a member of 7 Armoured Brigade. That prompts me to reflect that those of us who—albeit only on ranges, not in Korea or in war—have smelt cordite and know what it is like to fire heavy shells are just a bit more careful about advocating bombing and all the horror that goes with it than those who have never had such an experience. I do not criticise those who are of a different generation, but I find it interesting that perhaps those who have had experience in the services are rather more careful than most sitting on the green Benches about recommending military action for others.

I find the bombing nauseating. I am ashamed that it should be endorsed by a Labour Government. I was told in Baghdad three weeks ago that the Iraqis thought that it was not the British following on the Americans, but in many cases the British Foreign Office being in the driving seat. For some of us, that makes matters worse.

It is poignant that we should be discussing bombing in this Chamber, which was bombed in the early 1940s and later reconstructed. Let us go back to that bombing for a moment. Throughout the 1930s, there were many, not only in the Labour party but elsewhere in British society, who abominated Winston Churchill and all that they thought he stood for. Come 1940 and 1941, when bombs were being dropped and there was a blitz particularly on London, but also on Coventry, Clydebank and elsewhere, what happened? Those who had criticised Churchill for the previous decade became some of his most ardent supporters.

That is the effect of bombing. It rallies people behind their leaders. It is human nature not to go into the whys and wherefores, but to ask the simple question, "Who is dropping the bombs that create such havoc?" Therefore, bombing is both immoral and counter-productive, and I am deeply ashamed to be involved in this policy.

I have a number of questions. First, given the case of Bhopal, a fertiliser plant in India which exploded killing thousands, how will it be possible to bomb alleged chemical or biological plants in Baghdad without the potential for massive civilian casualties? When I interrupted the Foreign Secretary's speech, he said that I had asked him the same question in February. The reason that I repeated the question was that it was not answered in February. I am not sure that it can be answered. It certainly was not answered today. If one puts down high explosives on chemical or biological weapons plants, if they exist, one had better try to be clear about what the effects might be. The truth is that nobody knows.

My second question concerns recent US intelligence failures—for example, cruise missiles on Afghanistan and on the Al Shifa factory in Khartoum. Who now believes that that factory had anything to do with weapons of war? The Empta o-ethyl-methyl-phosphonoic acid was not found in sufficient quantities or in a position to prove anything about weapons manufacture.

Given the military ineptitude manifested in Iran, Libya and Somalia, how can we be certain this time that the right targets will be identified or hit or destroyed? I ask a direct question of those on the Front Bench: is it true, as has been reported, that, within the past 24 hours, one of the apparently superlatively targeted cruise missiles landed in Iranian territory, not in Iraq? Is that the degree of accuracy that we are to expect? I am cynical about the supposedly highly accurate targeting.

Thirdly, how will it be possible to "teach Saddam a lesson"—to use the jargon—when he is almost certainly several meters underground in a different bunker every night? How can we be sure that he will not gain in strength in Iraq and the Arab world if he has the opportunity, doubtless with full international media coverage, to walk through streets littered with civilian casualties?

Fourthly, there has been no answer to the question that I tabled to the Attorney-General and other Ministers. Which international law gives Britain the authority to bomb Iraq? Which international law authorises Britain to encourage opposition groups to overthrow a Head of State? I should like an answer. It is not sufficient to say that two out of five members of the Security Council somehow have the authority to do so. Not true, I am told by international lawyers in Edinburgh. I should like the precise reference for such authority, by letter afterwards or in the winding-up speech from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

Fifthly, is an alternative to Saddam Hussein really preferable? How can we be sure that post-Saddam Iraq will not descend into civil war along religious and tribal lines—like the north of Iraq, as my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) knows from her personal experience—drawing in neighbouring countries and resulting in a major conflict in the middle east?

When I went to Baghdad with Albert Reynolds, the former Taoiseach, who is not a naive man, and three of his Irish colleagues, we were invited to dinner in the house of Tariq Aziz, after we had met him for two and a half hours in the morning. I am quite open about that. It was a long session, during which both Tariq Aziz and Dr. Riyadh al Quasi said separately, "The west may think that we are extremists, but we are considered to be too moderate by many of those of the generation that may follow us." I beg colleagues to be careful about what we are creating in that country, especially if sanctions go on and on. The next generation will loathe us, and that is storing up great trouble for the future.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: Is that the same Tariq Aziz who alleged that no atrocities at all were committed in Kuwait?

Mr. Dalyell: I asked Tariq Aziz about the Kuwait disappeared. According to him, there were between 800 and 900 disappeared Kuwaitis, and 1,100 to 1,200 disappeared Iraqis. I can only report what was said. I do not know the accuracy of either figure.

Sixthly, with the no-fly zone and only one United Nations aircraft flying, how can strikes against Iraq be without warning? What about the almost 400 UN personnel who remain? The Government may correct me, but I understand that there are also some 20 ambassadors still in Iraq. If the bombing continues, as it looks like doing, what will happen to those people? They may find it extremely difficult to get out.

Seventhly, it has been said that eight years of UNSCOM should have been time enough to search the whole of Asia. Is it possible that the delay reflects a desire on the part of certain countries in the west for permanent sanctions, rather than the intransigence of Iraq? It is widely said in Jordan and Iraq that the Saudis have an oil allocation of 3 million barrels which was originally

[Mr. Dalyell]

designated for the Iraqis. With oil prices so low and the Saudi debt mounting to serious proportions, the Saudis do not want to surrender that advantage. In certain circles, there may be a feeling that it would be disastrous for Iraqi oil to come on stream. That problem must be addressed.

Eighthly, UNSCOM's weapons inspectors appear to be dominated by Americans. One of their spokesmen is British and they have an Australian leader. Is that satisfactory? Would it not be better for UNSCOM to have a far wider section of personnel from other countries? Surely technical experts from other countries could do the job just as effectively.

Ninthly, United States and Britain hold large stocks of chemical and biological weapons. America has used chemical weapons on civilians with devastating effect—for instance, agent orange in Vietnam—and both countries used depleted uranium in the Gulf war. Is that background really compatible with asking for full co-operation from Iraq? How do we answer those who say that that represents hypocrisy, based on a concept of western superiority over Arabs? These are delicate but important matters.

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): My point will not affect the main thrust of the hon. Gentleman's last question. I think that I heard him say that Britain and America retain large stocks of biological and chemical weapons. I believe that neither Britain nor America has any stocks of biological weapons, which were banned in 1972, other than the most minute amount for defensive research purposes. The hon. Gentleman may wish to correct his earlier remark.

Mr. Dalyell: I am conscious of the fact that Porton Down has examples, legitimately so, of aggressive agents. In order to take defensive measures, one has to have certain quantities, which undoubtedly we have, of aggressive agents.

The most likely trigger for a military attack has been the UNSCOM demand for papers. I can only report to the House that both Albert Reynolds—as I say, not a naive man—and I thought that, when the individuals responsible for managing and handing over the papers said that they had already given 2 million documents, they meant it. It may not be at all popular, but I just make the general observation that it is unsatisfactory if westerners assert that they disbelieve everything that the Iraqis appear to say.

In the 1980s, our relationship with the Iraqis was very different. Many of them were educated in Britain. In a sense, come to think of it, it is a tragedy that relations between Britain and Iraq have deteriorated this far. Iraq is not simply Saddam Hussein; it is a lot of other people, many of them brought up in a British medical, educational or industrial culture.

On a specific issue, since the flashpoint for the present problem is the difficulty of entry into the national command headquarters of the Ba'ath party, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister said that he would make available evidence that he had that showed that "material"—that was the word that he used—of considerable importance and relevance was in those headquarters. Perhaps that could be made available in the Library of the House.

I will be in the Lobby voting against the Government tonight. Bombing is absolutely no way to solve these difficult problems.

6.54 pm

Sir Raymond Whitney (Wycombe): The hon. Members for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) and for Tatton (Mr. Bell) referred to their military experience, citing it as one of the factors that led them to oppose the actions against Iraq that the Government agreed last night. My military experience—I am proud to say that I served in the Northamptonshire Regiment in the Commonwealth Division in Korea—leads me to the opposite conclusion, that any temptation to appease violence and dictatorships leads to even more trouble.

I certainly agree that no one who has had the privilege of serving in the military forces in any way takes lightly the possibility of military conflict. I am sure that the three of us would agree—two of us of the same generation—that the fact that military experience in the House is now naturally, in the workings of anno domini, a declining feature is a loss to the House and to our deliberations.

That experience leads me to reinforce the view, however, that, whenever Britain's armed forces are committed by a democratic Government of whatever complexion, it is crucial that the Government do so in the knowledge that they have the full support of the House and the country. I hope that the debate will show the extent of the support for the action taken by the Government last night.

Of course, there is dissent. We understand and glory in the right to dissent from the common view. The hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) has no need to shout about his right to free speech. He is welcome and fully entitled to that.

My only fear is that the relatively small number of Labour Members who have spoken in opposition to their Government today may receive undue prominence tomorrow in the media's reports of today's debate. That would be regrettable for our armed forces, for the nation and for the principle on the basis of which the decision has been taken.

I wish to make only two points in a brief intervention. The first is that the crucial importance of the action that we have taken in relation to handling Saddam Hussein has been well dealt with, from the Prime Minister onwards. The great majority of contributors to the debate have emphasised the crucial importance of sustaining the credibility of the Government's position in ensuring that Saddam Hussein adheres to his undertakings to the United Nations and the Security Council.

I want to make a point in the rather longer context of the international community's struggle to find a system of international relationships which, to put it simplistically, will make this a better world, a world where moral values count and where aggression and violence do not succeed.

We started that process at least as long ago as 1918 or 1919 with the League of Nations. For a year or two, the League of Nations was not the lame duck that it later appeared to be. For a year or two, there was hope that it would work. With the horrors of the first world war heavily in the minds of politicians and statesmen of the time, it was hoped that something could evolve. We all know now that it failed. It is commonplace to deride it

for America's non-participation and its failure to stand up to Mussolini and Hitler. After the second world war, we tried again. Here, too, we ran into the problems of the cold war and the veto of the permanent members of the Security Council, and so on.

In recent years, as the cold war thawed, the position improved. I feel some relative and modified optimism that we can steadily evolve towards a system that actually works. As it involves human beings, however, it will always go wrong from time to time. Although it is possible to be optimistic, I disagree with the view expressed by Labour Members that we already have such a system, that international law is a wonderful thing, the United Nations is sacrosanct and perfect and Security Council resolutions must be followed to the letter. That approach is naive, hypocritical, or both. We know very well the difficulties involved in achieving action in the Security Council. If we follow the rules entirely to the letter, as the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) would have us do, no action would ever be taken against any tyrant or in any difficult situation. We have to be realistic as well as idealistic, so that we can make steady progress towards a better arrangement.

I believe that today's action will be another stage along the road. The hon. Member for Tatton asked what right the United States had to play sheriff. I hope that I have not misquoted him, but I am sure that the United States has no wish to play sheriff to the world, and nor do we, but both nations have a clear sense of responsibility. There is no concrete benefit for the United Kingdom or the United States in preserving the sanctity of Kuwait, but there is a broader interest that benefits every nation. We should not be mealy-mouthed about it; we should be sad, but proud, that our country and the United States are prepared to take action in such difficult circumstances. I hope that we do not resile from that and pussyfoot around, as it could be a step in the right direction.

It is interesting that we have not heard much about the veto. No doubt Mr. Yeltsin will complain, the Chinese may say something and the French may say something else, but at least there was a unanimous vote in the Security Council on 5 November condemning Saddam's failure to acknowledge and fulfil his undertaking. Progress is being made. It must continue, and this is another step forward.

My final point has already been made by the hon. Member for Walsall, South (Mr. George), the Chairman of the Defence Committee. We cannot expect to maintain our high-grade armed forces if we continue chipping away at the financial resources that they urgently need. It seems a bit trite for us to pay wonderful tributes to the skill, professionalism and valour of our service men. Although it is well deserved, we must also give them the resources that they need and I very much hope that the Government will re-examine that issue.

There are difficult days ahead and it is extremely important that the near unanimity in the House and the nation is held together so that we can face the immediate challenge to the international world order by Saddam Hussein and, in the longer term, take an important step towards a new system where the ideal put forward by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield and others of a world system of international control can be realised.

7.5 pm

Mr. Dale Campbell-Savours (Workington): I am very conscious of the fact that there are many service men in the Gulf tonight risking their lives for this country. Recognising that many people outside the House are watching and listening to the debate, let me place on record the fact that those who have spoken so far are not generally representative of the level of support—particularly among Labour Members—for the action in the Gulf. Let there be no doubt that it has overwhelming, almost unanimous support among Labour Members as will be shown in the Division tonight. I do not believe that the debate has reflected the general position.

The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) referred to his meeting with Saddam Hussein in 1982. Along with a couple of my hon. Friends, I tried to meet Saddam Hussein and his people in 1989, about nine months before the war in the Gulf. At that time Iraq was not on the international agenda, apart from the fact that there were allegations—subsequently shown to be true—that there had been major atrocities by the Iraqi Government at Halabja.

I remember the to-ing and fro-ing with the Iraqi embassy in London. We had asked for access to people who were in prison, to others who had been involved in the activities at Halabja and to people in Iraq who could account for what had happened and tell us what action had been taken. At first we were granted access, but then we received a message from the embassy saying that we could not go. Imagine my surprise when I heard that a cross-party delegation from the House had visited Iraq immediately after Halabja and before the war in 1990 and met Saddam Hussein's people on the very terms on which we had been rejected. We were extremely angry indeed. To explain my general view of the matter, I thought that they were a bunch of freeloaders who were prepared to go where others had not been permitted to go on a matter of principle.

Mr. Galloway: Name them.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: There is no need for me to name them as some of them are still hon. Members.

I want to express my unreserved support for the Government's position. We should also address the whole issue of ethical foreign policy, and I know what I mean by that. The Labour Government are criticised on the basis that we are not following an ethical foreign policy, but that is exactly what we are doing. We are saying no to dictatorships in the great tradition of Labour Governments this century. We have always argued against dictators and taken an ethical position. Once again, I am proud to identify myself with that policy.

Although I recognise that other European countries are giving us support this evening, I was a little surprised as I thought that some of them might have been more active in that support. We are laying ourselves on the line on an issue of principle. The whole world will benefit, so it should not be left uniquely to the United Kingdom and the United States to send in military personnel and equipment. Furthermore, let me say to those in the United Kingdom who want to oppose the conflict at a time when our airmen are in the Gulf risking their lives that what they are doing is shameful. It is quite outrageous, when our

[Mr. Campbell-Savours]

service men are risking life and limb for their country, for people here and outside to argue against what they are doing and to undermine them.

Mr. Corbyn: My hon. Friend's assertion that we should not debate the issues in Iraq because British forces are involved is astonishing. The whole point of democratic government is that one can discuss and hold to account. I only regret that we have had no opportunity to discuss the matter in advance of the massive commitment of British arms and service men in this conflict.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: We had an opportunity to debate the matter when the hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) introduced a debate on it only four weeks ago. A number of hon. Members participated in that debate; I do not remember my hon. Friend being present.

Mr. Corbyn: It was an Adjournment debate.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: It was an hour and a half's debate. This, too, is a debate on the Adjournment of the House.

May I now deal with what I believe to be at the heart of the matter: the work being done internationally on what I call a "post-Saddam Iraq"? That is the issue that we should be addressing. In America, the Republican party has taken the lead and, despite the noises on television last night from some Republicans who objected to the action being taken for political reasons, many Republicans are clearly pleased that the action is being taken.

We should set straight the record on Senator Lott, who is being accused of doing down the American Government in this time of crisis. I understand that Senator Lott, who last night opposed military action but whose justification for doing so was misrepresented, was one of the guiding lights behind the Iraqi National Liberation Act, which was constructed to seek a solution to a post-conflict Iraq once Saddam Hussein has gone. The only reservation that he was expressing last night was not that he was opposed to the war or to military conflict, but that he wanted military action to be accompanied by a political settlement in a post-Saddam Iraq.

That is a genuine argument to have. The Americans have been having it over the past six months. The American Congress and Senate have been trying to address the issue of what will happen once Saddam Hussein goes and what can be done to ease him out, which is why they have allocated some $90 million to the Iraqi National Congress. That is doubtless only the first tranche of money that the American Administration will allocate to the INC, which is effectively the opposition to Saddam Hussein. Moreover, they allocated some $3 million to the organisation that is in place to indict Saddam Hussein for his war crimes.

My case is simple: the Republican party in the USA has taken the lead in forcing this agenda and Clinton, in desperation, has had to accept it. He has had to accept that there must be a solution over and above simple military action. We in the United Kingdom must afford far more of our time to dealing with what will happen once Saddam Hussein's regime has been brought down. We must find a strategy. First, we must back the opposition groups. Secondly, we must frustrate the work of Saddam's front oil companies, such as Mecca Trading or Al Dawsar. Those companies, which trade illegally, sell oil either through northern Iraq to Turkey, or through the Shatt al-Arab area of southern Iraq, shipped off illicitly through Iranian waters into Dubai, and sold on from Dubai.

Those illegal oil revenues are used to fund Saddam's operation in Baghdad. The money is used to buy materials for the production of shells, chlorine nitrate for the production of explosives, tyres for Mig fighters, mobile radar systems and many other munitions. Those are bought illegally on the international market with revenues gained through breaches of sanctions. The United Nations has a responsibility to enforce the sanctions regime—to stop the revenues and the oil flows that are in breach of sanctions. The consequence will be that Saddam's regime will fall.

Over the past four or five months, I have been pressing the idea of a Basra enclave, which must form part of the final solution. The port of Basra on the Shatt al-Arab should be taken. It would provide a bridgehead to the sea. Its control should be under a substantially reinforced and properly funded INC, which is the only organisation representing the Iraqi opposition groups that is in a position to administer such a sub-region. The region should be a sanctions-free zone, shielded to the north by a no-fly zone. It should effectively be a new free Iraq in the south. It is a very small area on the edge of the sea at the top of the Gulf. It would expand northwards as the people of northern Iraq gain confidence in it, especially as it would be a sanctions-free zone.

My hon. Friend the Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) referred to the north of Iraq being a sanctions-free zone. I am a little concerned about that because of the nature of the boundary. A long boundary stretches between Kurdistan and the rest of Iraq, and it would be difficult to police a zone on that scale if Kurdistan were a sanctions-free area. However, with a small boundary between Iraq and what I call the Basra enclave, it would be easily enforceable and it would act inside Iraq as an incentive to others, who would see that there was life after sanctions and they had everything to gain by rising up in the north on the basis that the privileges of the enclave would be extended northwards. The area would become a strategic military site. It is an oil-rich area—one of the richest in Iraq—and it would be a trade and freight centre.

That is my proposal for a resolution of this conflict. Bombing alone will not resolve the problems. It may deal with the immediate problem of illicitly held military equipment, but any long-term solution must be far more innovative. We cannot rely on the Iraqi people, with their limited resources, to rise up and move that dictatorship. They need an incentive, which will come through the Basra enclave.

7.18 pm

Mr. Michael Colvin (Romsey): The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours) was absolutely right to put on the record the fact that the vast majority of

right hon. and hon. Members support the Government's action. He also drew attention to the minority of hon. Members—and one notable right hon. Member—who disagree. In our Bristol days, I often shared a platform with the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). We always disagreed then, and we continue to disagree now. However, I shall defend to the last ditch his right to stand up in this Chamber and disagree. Such a right is denied to those who profess to be politicians in countries like Iraq. It is important that we defend that right. Those who disagree with the Government's action must simply judge the impact of what they have said in this Chamber on the morale of our forces who are putting their lives at risk.

Even those who disagree with the action that is being taken will hope that it ends Saddam Hussein's cynical game of brinkmanship, which is a danger not only to his people but to his neighbours in the middle east and to the world at large. He is in flagrant violation of UN Security Council resolution 687, which sets out the terms of the ceasefire that ended the Gulf war. That ceasefire was predicated on full Iraqi co-operation in the dismantling of outlawed missiles and weapons of mass destruction and their production facilities.

Saddam Hussein has broken his word twice—most recently on 14 November—in connection with undertakings to comply with the UN resolutions and to allow UNSCOM inspectors free access. That is the legal justification for the military strikes.

Some reporters have said that the timing of the operation is awkward, to say the least. Unfortunately, events show no respect for anniversaries. At this time of year, we remember those who were murdered in the crash of the Boeing 747 at Lockerbie in 1988, in which Islamic fundamentalists are thought to have been involved and many innocent people lost their lives. At Christmas, our minds should be elsewhere: many people will have noted the incongruity of the Prime Minister making his announcement outside No. 10 Downing street with Christmas tree lights twinkling in the background. Although there is also a question about timing, given the possible impeachment of President Clinton, there is no excuse for not taking action. We had no alternative: military action could not have been avoided.

Several hon. Members have mentioned Ramadan, which is due to start this weekend. Does that mean that the air strikes will not continue beyond the weekend? The Secretary of State for Defence is to wind up the debate, and I hope that he will say something about that. When is the deadline for the end of military action?

In his statement, the Prime Minister referred to the importance of maximising surprise. Given the events associated with this season of the year, Saddam Hussein probably thought that this was the least likely time for military action against him. By acting now, we have maximised the surprise factor, and the operation will probably succeed for that reason, among others.

I have two questions for the Secretary of State for Defence that are relevant to the operation, especially if the deployment of ground forces is eventually required. Several hon. Members have mentioned the Gulf war, and my questions arise out of that conflict. First, there is the matter of what is known as IFF—identification friend and foe. There were several very regrettable incidents in the war in which friendly fire led to the deaths of allied ce men. Will the Secretary of State confirm that IFF is thoroughly up-to-date and workable?

Secondly, there is the still-unanswered question of so-called Gulf war syndrome. The Select Committee on Defence remains concerned about that problem, and still awaits the outcome of the research that is being done. Will the Secretary of State assure the House that, if our forces are deployed on the ground, the tablets and injections that they are given in advance as protection against chemical and biological weapons are effective and will not lead to the difficulties experienced by personnel in the Gulf war?

I wish to take this opportunity to pay tribute to our defence industries. There have been many newspaper reports about the accuracy of the Tomahawk cruise missiles involved in today's operations. Apparently, those missiles have been about 90 per cent. accurate—twice as accurate as in the Gulf war. That emphasises the need to ensure that we and our allies maintain the competence of our defence industrial base.

Faced with enormous competition from the other side of the Atlantic, European defence industries must think more seriously about joining forces. That would enable them to offer true competition in the free-for-all against the American giants in the worldwide market, and to achieve the critical mass for research and development necessary to improve the efficiency of our weapons. By improving the accuracy of our weapons, collateral damage and the loss of civilian lives have been reduced.

The Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence have set out the objectives of today's operation. We have also heard about the British contribution to that operation, but we were told that taking out Saddam Hussein was definitely not one of the objectives. I strongly support the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who said that Saddam eventually should be required to answer in court for his war crimes and for his crimes against humanity and his people.

We were also told that the intention behind the operation was certainly not to punish the people of Iraq but to liberate them. The objective is not to destroy the great country of Iraq but to build it up. However, is it not about time that we finished the unfinished business of the Gulf war and put an end to Saddam Hussein?

Government spokesmen, in both the United States and the United Kingdom, have made it clear that they would be very happy "to see him go". Why cannot our forces make Saddam go? If they do not, he will be free to fight another day, and there have been alarming reports of the Ba'ath party's determination to rule the world. In that connection, I have a number of questions that I hope that the Secretary of State will answer when he replies to the debate.

First, what if Saddam Hussein lets loose a chemical and biological weapon in retaliation? Newspaper reports tell us—although I agree that they should not always be believed—that in 1991 the Americans planned to retaliate with a nuclear device, and one Pentagon insider was quoted as saying, "One drop of anthrax and we nuke Baghdad." In an operation such as has been undertaken today by British and American forces, it is vital that consideration be given to the risk of an escalation in military action.

[Mr. Michael Colvin]

The Government deserve credit for the line that they have taken on what is known as "no first use" of nuclear weapons. There is a strong lobby, especially in connection with debates about the non-proliferation treaty, to commit nations to no first use. However, the only defence against chemical and biological weapons—regarded by many as the poor man's nuclear device—is the deterrent of nuclear retaliation.

Mr. Corbyn: While the hon. Gentleman is on the subject of nuclear weapons and non-proliferation, will he comment on the position of Israel, which has a nuclear weapons capability? Should we not be more interested in decommissioning weapons across the whole region, and should not that decommissioning cover Israel's nuclear weapons?

Mr. Colvin: The hon. Gentleman must have read my thoughts, because that was going to be my next question. However, I was going to ask it of the Secretary of State for Defence, who is the one who should know the answer. I hope that the right hon. Gentleman will tell the House what talks have taken place with the Israelis in advance of the action in Iraq.

A crucial question remains unanswered. If, as we all hope, the military action is successful, what will happen next? Do we move in and occupy Iraq? On television this morning, the Chief of the Defence Staff said that to do so would require about 100,000 troops. There are only just over that many troops in the whole of the British Army, so I am not surprised that he said that it could not be done and that, as a result, taking out Saddam Hussein was not one of the operation's objectives. That underlines the need—referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney)—for us to re-examine the way in which expenditure on our armed forces has been reduced by successive Governments over the years. Members of the Defence Committee, certainly, feel that the present level of expenditure is barely tolerable, and must not be lowered further.

We also know that, if the level of spending planned for the next three years is to be maintained, the Secretary of State must save considerable amounts through greater efficiency, smarter procurement and the sale of assets. If those savings are not achieved, over the next four years we shall see a further 4 per cent. cut in our defence expenditure, in addition to the 4 per cent. cut that we already expect over three years. What the Chief of the Defence Staff said this morning constitutes a reminder to us all that the cuts have gone far enough.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): The Chief of the Defence Staff was asked whether one of the military objectives of the campaign was to "take out" Saddam Hussein. He made it clear that that was not the case. Such a military objective would require hundreds of thousands of troops. In any circumstances, the troops would not all be British—a multinational force would be involved—but the Chief of the Defence Staff made the point to illustrate how big such a military task would be, even if it were desirable. It is not one of the objectives of the current operation.

Mr. Colvin: I understood that precisely, but I could not resist reminding the House of the importance of maintaining our defence expenditure and not reducing the size of our armed forces—especially our Army—to below the 100,000 minimum that the Chief of the Defence Staff said would be required. As I said, I realise that a multinational force would be involved.

What about reactions to the military action? The reactions of France and Russia have been mentioned, but those countries, probably more than any others, opposed the "taking out" of Saddam Hussein in 1991. As I said earlier, the fact that we did not finish the job then has brought us to our present position, so in a sense it is the fault of those countries that we are where we are. Had we finished the job in 1991, everyone would be a great deal happier.

What about the Arab world? We shall want to hear from the Secretary of State for Defence just how much discussion there has been with the Gulf Co-operation Council and others. What about the Iraqi people themselves? I know that, even under a leader like Saddam Hussein, an attack from outside can have a unifying effect on the people of a country, but there is always the danger that this attack could strengthen Saddam Hussein's position rather than weakening it. As we all know, the people of Iraq are subjected to a bombardment not of cruise missiles but of propaganda from their Government all the time.

I agree with the earlier suggestion that the BBC World Service, Sky television and the rest should think more carefully about what they broadcast, in order to convey the true story. There is no doubt that some television reports have given the wrong impression in regard to the impact of sanctions. There are no sanctions on food or medicines; Saddam Hussein can still buy them with his oil revenues. It would be far better if he used them for that purpose, rather than spending what I understand are millions, or even billions, of dollars on building his armour-plated palaces. I wonder what chance there is of a political overthrow of Saddam Hussein if the air strikes are successful. I take the point that was made earlier: if help is to be given to a political upheaval in Iraq, it is important for outside support to go to the Shias, the Kurds and any others who may be considering such action.

Peaceful solutions have been sought in Iraq and have failed, because of Saddam Hussein's evil obstruction and deceit. The House believes that there is no alternative to military action. Our forces are being committed to action in an area in which British blood has been shed for the achievement of a precarious peace, in 1991. We support the Government's decision in the knowledge that our service men and women are the best in the world. If they go into battle, they will do so with the overwhelming support of both our Parliament and our people.

Mr. Winnick: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Can you tell me whether many hon. Members are trying to catch your eye, and can you tell me what are the chances of their being called if speeches are somewhat long?

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Sir Alan Haselhurst): I think that the hon. Gentleman can see pretty well how many hon. Members are trying to catch my eye. I hope that they will all realise that, if they are to have a chance of speaking, they should consider not speaking for too long.

7.36 pm

Mr. John Home Robertson (East Lothian): For some years, I served on the Defence Committee under the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin). He made a thoughtful speech, containing some fair points and some that were not so fair. In any event, the House is in sombre mood. There is nothing remotely exhilarating in the failure of diplomacy in circumstances such as those faced by our forces tonight.

The debate, fundamentally, concerns whether the United Kingdom fulfils a responsibility to help to deal with a serious military threat. We in the House owe it to the rest of the country, and to our service men, to rise to that responsibility—especially those of us who have not personally served in any armed forces. Inevitably, given history, that constitutes the vast majority of us.

I have been in the House for just long enough to remember the Saturday debate on the Falklands crisis, and the debates on the emergency in the Gulf in 1991 and the decision to deploy British forces in Bosnia. Since then, I have gained a little knowledge and understanding of the work of our armed forces, through the armed forces parliamentary scheme and my membership, for a few years, of the Defence Committee. In that context, I saw some of the devastation of Kuwait in 1991. I also spent several weeks helping relief work in the civil war zone in Bosnia. I know that military conflict is terrifying and destructive, and that people are killed and maimed. I am very reluctant to see people being put in danger in any conflict. Those of us who are not pacifists, however, must accept that there are circumstances in which the failure to use military force leads to far greater evils than the use of such force. I am satisfied that we face such circumstances now.

Some of us criticised the United States and others for their failure to intervene earlier to protect Muslim communities in Bosnia. I am pleased to see that the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) is present, because he knows much more about that than I do. I saw for myself the consequences of that delay for towns and villages throughout central Bosnia.

I can say from experience that it is much too easy for well-meaning people and, perhaps, opportunistic Governments to wring their hands, and give oppressors and aggressors just one more chance—and then another, and then another. The road to Srebrenica was paved with last chances. One of the most emotional and harrowing experiences of my life was that of coming face to face with some of the orphans and widows of Srebrenica in a refugee camp in Tuzla, just weeks after their husbands and fathers had been massacred in what was supposed to be a UN-protected safe area. That was an awful abdication of responsibility by the UN, by NATO and, yes, by the United States—but I do not remember hearing the hon. Member for Tatton complain about the fact that the world sheriff about whom he was rather scathing this evening turned up then. The Americans turned up late; many of us would have liked them to turn up sooner—would, indeed, have liked others to turn up sooner to do what was necessary in Bosnia. They have turned up on time on this occasion, and it is right that we should support them. I certainly hope that nothing like Srebrenica ever happens again. It is one very good reason for supporting the United States because what it is doing now is right.

If we know for certain that prevarication will lead to greater evils, it must be right to intervene. I believe that it is right and ethical. We have read more than enough about atrocities involving chemical weapons in Halabja. We have seen more than enough evidence of wicked oppression of Kurds, Shias and political dissidents in Iraq. My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) referred to that evidence, which she knows a great deal about. I saw with my own eyes what happened to Kuwait in 1991.

The Iraqi Government have been ducking and deceiving ever since the ceasefire signed at Safwan in 1991. We have been told time and again by successive UNSCOM inspectors that they were thwarted and obstructed in their efforts to locate and destroy chemical and biological agents and manufacturing facilities. Every time that fresh undertakings have been given under threat of military action, those undertakings have been broken within weeks. That is what has just happened again. Richard Butler's report to the Secretary-General of the United Nations dated 15 December could not be clearer.

We know that the Iraqi Government have a stock of chemical and biological weapons and that they have active development and manufacturing programmes to produce more such weapons. We know from bitter experience that they will not hesitate to use those weapons to suppress their own people or to overrun their neighbours. Even my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) acknowledged that. The fundamental question is whether to leave President Saddam Hussein in possession of such weaponry in the certain expectation of untold mayhem in future or whether to do something about it now.

It is absurd to suggest that last night's action was part of some Machiavellian plot to delay domestic political processes in Washington. The action was triggered by Richard Butler's letter to the Secretary-General dated 15 December. Is it likely that an Australian weapons inspector would send a report to a Ghanaian Secretary-General of the United Nations simply to deal with some domestic political problem facing the President of the United States of America?

Mr. Corbyn: Has my hon. Friend cared to reflect on the fact that it is odd that, once the report had been received by the Secretary-General, there was no opportunity for the Security Council to meet to discuss what to do with it? Instead, the United States and Britain took pre-emptive action and started bombardment, thus rendering the action illegal under the terms of the UN charter.

Mr. Home Robertson: What was there to talk about? We have been through all this only a month ago and many times before that. *[Interruption.]* My hon. Friend the Member for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) can make excuses for the Iraqi regime if he wants to, but I do not intend to do so. The domestic political situation in the United States had nothing to do with this.

It is worth mentioning that the Defence Secretary in the United States, who played a part in the unanimous decision of the Security Council in America to go ahead with the action, is a lifelong Republican. Would he be doing that to save the bacon of a Democratic President? I rather doubt it. I have total confidence in the integrity of our Prime Minister and my right hon. Friends the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Defence.

[Mr. Home Robertson]

As a Scottish Member of Parliament I think it is right and proper that Scottish service personnel are involved in this operation and I pray that they will all return home safely. Scots can and do—they always have and I hope they always will—contribute to effective international enforcement and peacemaking operations precisely because we are an integral and vital part of the effective armed forces of the United Kingdom. Most of us in Scotland are determined that that will always remain the case and that we will remain part of a powerful and effective security family.

I want to dissociate myself in the strongest possible terms from the comments made by my hon. Friends the Members for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) and for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). It is nauseating nonsense for my hon. Friend the Member for Kelvin to suggest that the United Nations is responsible for the suffering of the Iraqi people. There is nothing to prevent the Iraqi Government from importing the humanitarian and medical supplies that their people require. They have deliberately chosen not to do so. They seem to prefer to use their own people as pawns in a cynical power game.

We have responsibilities to the oppressed people of the middle east, be they in Palestine, Iraq or anywhere else where we can realistically help, just as we have responsibilities to the oppressed Muslim people of Bosnia. I welcome the fact that our Government are rising to those responsibilities and I join hon. Members on both sides of the House in expressing my whole-hearted support for what is being done by our service men over Iraq today.

7.46 pm

Mr. Julian Brazier (Canterbury): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson) who, for many years, was a distinguished member of the Select Committee on Defence, which I have subsequently joined. I hope that he will not be offended if I say that whereas he said that he spoke as a Scottish Member of Parliament, I speak as a British rather than just an English Member of Parliament. I entirely endorse the sentiments he expressed at the end of his speech.

The whole House is agreed on the gravity of these events. Hon. Members in most parts of the House have expressed support for the action. We feel pride in those men and women in uniform who are risking their lives for our sake. It is important to remember that they are doing that far away from their loved ones at a time when most of us are about to go home to our Christmas dinners and our families.

I want to discuss three points. First, I want to deal with the objectives of the mission, a subject on which much has been said already. Secondly, I want to discuss the means of achieving those objectives and, thirdly, in a non-partisan way, I should like to discuss the implications for two areas of the strategic defence review.

I shall deal with the objectives first. Over the past few months, we have heard a number of statements saying that we were determined to force Saddam Hussein to comply with the requirements of the UN weapons inspectors. Important as those requirements and inspections are, that cannot be a military objective. I think that the Prime Minister was right to implicitly acknowledge that by settling for a lesser objective when, in his broadcast yesterday and in the House today, he chose to say that we were focusing on damaging Saddam Hussein's capability.

My right hon. Friend the Leader of the Opposition was right to say that we should go for a greater objective and that, in the long run, the aim must be to get rid of Saddam Hussein. We must be clear about the fact that no fuzzy intermediate objective is possible. Either we seek to kill or remove him and install some other regime, or we settle for merely doing what damage we can from the air.

It is Saddam Hussein who will decide whether or not to comply with the requirements of the UN weapons inspectors. If, as long as he is there, we try to pretend that we can force him to do so when he has set his mind against it, we will simply discredit ourselves in the eyes of those in the Arab world because they will know that we will not be able to deliver on that while he is there. That is why I believe that, in the long run, we will have to face the prospect of getting rid of Saddam Hussein and installing another regime. The hon. Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), who has just left the Chamber, spent some time discussing whether it was enough simply to bomb.

I would not pretend for a moment that this will be an easy task. Removing Saddam Hussein would be difficult enough, but ensuring that his replacement was a more reasonable Iraqi Government would be equally as difficult. Next door to Iraq is Iran, which has one of the most bloodthirsty Governments in the world. That country knows very well that the majority of Iraqis are Shi'ite and it would dearly love to annex Iraq and create a power bloc even worse than the one we face now.

I want to make just one point about the means of achieving our objectives. It may prove impossible to deal with Saddam Hussein by air power alone. Barring a lucky accident where bombing catches him outside the deep vaults where he tends to shelter when it is occurring, I fear that it will probably prove insufficient. On the last couple of occasions when I went to Beirut, by chance—I hope that I was not entirely to blame for it—serious bombing occurred. On one occasion, I was struck by the extraordinary capacity of reinforced concrete to resist the Soviet rockets which have much larger warheads than the cruise missiles that are available to us. As a result of his experiences in both the last Gulf war and the Iran-Iraq war, Saddam Hussein is making colossal use of this. Indeed, the Prime Minister in his statement testified that in one particular building, the cellar was as big as the superstructure, enjoying, I suspect, this protection.

As we bomb it is sad to think—I am particularly aware of the presence of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell)—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) is not in the Chamber, so the hon. Gentleman should not refer to him.

Mr. Brazier: I stand entirely rebuked, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Although we can see him, I accept that he is outside the Chamber. I am aware of the hon. Gentleman's earlier remarks, although I am on the other side of both arguments from him. Saddam Hussein and his regime will have gained considerable comfort from what they have seen in Kosovo. Whatever the rights and wrongs there—this is not the time to discuss it, but I am against more

involvement in the Balkans—the spectacle of the west shouting at and hectoring the Serbs, only at the last moment to back two thirds of the way down, and finally to agree to send in observers on the humiliating basis that they would not even have personal weapons, must have encouraged Saddam Hussein to think that he could push us further.

We cannot rule out the use of ground forces, bloody and difficult as that may be. I do not underestimate for a moment the scale of involvement necessary. Throughout the Arab world, moderate states, some of which might wish to lean towards us, have seen the west huff and puff at Saddam Hussein over a number of years. Indeed, in 1991 they saw him stay in power after the allied onslaught. However wrong we may think the analysis, they saw both Ronald Reagan and Lady Thatcher, for different reasons, depart from the scene while Saddam Hussein remained. There is a danger that he will feel stronger if the bombings fail to achieve a substantial reduction in his strength.

The Secretary of State should look at two areas of the strategic defence review again. *[Interruption.]* Would he like to intervene?

The Secretary of State for Defence *indicated dissent.*

Mr. Brazier: In testimony to the House and in even more detail to the Select Committee on Defence, Ministers and commanders were open about the fact that, in implementing the defence review, they would have to abandon the ability to mobilise a large field army. The televised testimony of the Chief of the Defence Staff was that, if we were to engage in two operations of the size of the one in Bosnia, one would have to be abandoned after about six months. Our Chairman was so astonished by that answer that he repeated the question. Surely I do not have to remind the House that we are already involved in one Bosnia-sized operation—in Bosnia.

I understand that, this morning, Sir Charles Guthrie made clear the scale of the operations that would be required by the allied forces if we have to use ground forces in Iraq, as some of us believe may eventually prove necessary. That suggests two points to me about the SDR. The first relates to our industrial base, and I must in part disagree with my hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin). It worries me terribly that we should be asking our defence industry to blend with those of our European neighbours, such as Germany, which reluctantly supports this operation and is contributing nothing to it, and France, which appears actively to oppose it. Even more immediately serious, we must secure our supply of ammunition from the Royal Ordnance factories. For more than a year now, British Aerospace has said that they are not financially viable and are close to closure. God knows we had enough trouble getting one category of shell from the Belgians. What would it be like if, in a few months' time, we were to deploy our troops on the ground and find that, of our tiny war stocks, only a few days' supply remained and we were reliant for all our ammunition on our continental neighbours?

The other strand relates to the reserves, which will come as no surprise to the House. At present, it is still possible for us to build up our small Regular Army. We have some 30 Territorial Army infantry battalions, nine engineer regiments and seven yeomanry reconnaissance regiments, mostly well trained, albeit on varying scales of equipment, behind the two paper-thin regular divisions. Those divisions have excellent troops, but are planned to have practically nothing in reserve. Were a conflict of this sort to take place, the infantry, armoured reconnaissance troops and engineers would be the most overstretched. It took almost the whole of the regular Royal Engineers when we had a much larger Regular Army to keep just two brigades in the field during the previous Gulf war. Yet all three of those categories of the TA are to be cut in half under plans that are scheduled for the next few months. Britain could never mount a sustained operation, taking casualties, guarding lines of communication in a country that has much more difficult terrain than that of Kuwait and dealing with prisoners of war, refugees and the civilian population, without drawing on substantial reserves—reserves that we shortly will no longer have.

I urge the Government, at a time when the Americans are revisiting this issue and are standing up extra National Guard forces—indeed, they are taking a fresh look at a higher readiness for elements within their 13 National Guard divisions—to reconsider both those issues.

7.58 pm

Mr. Frank Cook (Stockton, North): We have life comfortable in this House. The young men and women who are standing ready would say that we have it cushy. We can engage in debate, put forward arguments, register reservations, record qualifications and then go home and sleep easy in our beds. The young men and young women do not have that option. They do as they are told. When it is red, they stand at the door, and when it is green on, they go. They have no choice about it. I do not want there to be any mistake about my views tonight. They have my unqualified support. I pray to God tonight, as I did last night when I heard that the operation had started, that they will be able to fulfil their duties effectively with minimal casualties, disable the military establishments which are their objective targets and get this phase of the operation out of the way to halt the production of weapons of mass destruction and perhaps remove them altogether.

I cannot remember who said it, but one of the truisms of our time is that those who ignore the lessons of history are condemned to repeat them. I have listened to the debate, which has now gone on for some time, and heard some selective history and dodgy logic, so I feel obliged to try to set the record straight. The history to which my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister referred during his statement started about seven and a half years ago, but more than 10 years ago, in the Pentagon, a discussion paper was passed to me. It assessed developments in the middle east, two and a half years before the invasion of Kuwait. It outlined a number of facts, made a couple of speculations and finished with a question.

The facts were as follows. First, Saddam Hussein was developing a Scud missile to extend the range effectively and to improve its accuracy. Secondly, Iraq was thought to be close to perfecting its biological, chemical and nuclear warheads of mass destruction, which could be delivered by the extended Scud. Thirdly, it was therefore thought that Israel would soon be exposed to the threat of biological, chemical and nuclear assault from the east. Fourthly, the Pentagon paper drew attention to the fact that, 18 years before, Israel had launched a pre-emptive strike on an Iraqi nuclear power station that was thought at the time to be producing weapons-grade plutonium.

[Mr. Frank Cook]

Next, the paper speculated on what might happen if Israel adopted a similar course of action in the circumstances prevailing at the time the paper was written, with particular note taken of the fact that fundamental Islamicism was in the ascendancy in several middle east states. Was there not a possibility, the paper speculated, that such a pre-emptive strike might ignite a jihad—a religious war that could conceivably spread through all Muslim countries, from the west coast of Africa, through the middle east, across the southern states of the Soviet Union, as it then was, and into Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia?

The House must understand that such a jihad would not simply be conducted between nations; it could take on the hideous characteristics of religious conflict between, within and throughout communities in every country of the world. It could take place in Bradford, Bristol, or South Shields. Faced with that horrendous prospect, the document asked, what strategy could be adopted to avoid that fearful scenario?

Having drawn attention to that document, I shall lay it to one side as I remind the House that, when Saddam Hussein made hostages of foreigners within Iraq and Kuwait, he incarcerated them in Baghdad, ostensibly for use as a protective human shield. By negotiating with the Iraqi embassy during the conflict, I succeeded in securing the release of two of those unfortunate individuals; neither was a constituent of mine—their cases having been brought to my attention by relatives in my constituency—nor had they met each other. They were both oilfield workers who, despite not knowing each other, told me identical stories at different times, one on the telephone and the other when he came to thank me.

Both said that British consular officials had told them, many months before the Iraqi incursion into Kuwait, that some sectors of the oilfields and some well heads would change hands, but that they were not to worry because they were key workers and would be seen as essential talent, with guarantees of continuing employment and personal safety. If I match that with the claim made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), that Saddam Hussein had told him that the United States ambassador to Iraq had previously said that any dispute between Iraq and Kuwait would be viewed by the USA as an Arab question, I have to consider seriously the probability that the west duped the Iraqis into actively pursuing their ambitions in much the same way as we British had duped General Galtieri in the Falkland Islands episode, by allowing him to think that he would be successful and that the logistic demands of any effective retaliation on our part would be too great.

That tactic was crucial to our whole strategy, because the oilfield smokescreen was crucial to the mixed force that was necessary in the Gulf. It entailed the recruitment of Islamic nations into the alliance, as an effective counter-measure to the prospect of a jihad. The success of the Gulf operation was not purely military and did not lie merely in the size of the forces massed against Saddam, considerable though it was. The political success lay in the engagement of Islamic nations in the alliance, and the non-participation of Israel before the event and its studious decision not to retaliate during the event, when it was so indiscriminately attacked by Scud missiles launched from Iraq. There are those who remain firmly convinced that the alliance force was fighting Israel's war.

I have pondered those various factors for some years now. A year last October, I had the opportunity to meet General Brent Scowcroft, who, both before and during the Gulf war, was chief security adviser to President George Bush. I outlined to him the thesis I have outlined to the House today and concluded my remarks by asking him what he thought. He had listened intently and in silence throughout the 15-minute outline and he paused for a long time, never taking his eyes from mine, before replying. He said simply:

"Mr. Cook, I think there could be a great deal of validity in what you say."

That was the sum total of his observations.

That brings me back to today. I have to ask, what is different? We do not have now, as we had then, a country that has been invaded; nor do we have the smokescreen of either the oilfields or the involvement of other Islamic nations; nor do we have any support in military terms from the Islamic countries. We still have Scud missiles, and warheads of mass destruction that are probably nearer to perfection than they were before, albeit perhaps secreted away. However, we also have an Israeli Government headed by a man who is so deaf to views other than his own that he is positively frightening.

We are faced with the same question as the one that faced us originally: what do we do to get out of that fearsome scenario? How can we stop it? We have already heard tonight that simply sending in a few cruise missiles and a few bombers will not provide an effective solution to the problem, which will return to us, time and again, unless we adopt additional measures as one or two hon. Members have suggested.

Before addressing that issue, I shall comment on the views expressed by some of my comrades. I have reservations about the military exercise, even though I support it fully. However, I also have reservations about some of my comrades' reservations, and I shall try to explain my reservations. I am confused by the lack of logic. I recall many years campaigning, working and even fighting to attain government. I fought alongside many of the comrades whom I see in the Chamber tonight and who have expressed certain views with which I must take issue. I remember the massacre at Halabja and how people called for a quick response—retaliation and an end to that exercise. They were critical when that response was not forthcoming from the then Conservative Government, and I shared their views and voiced my own criticism. I wonder how my comrades think that we can achieve a rapid reaction. We talk blithely about training, preparing and equipping rapid reaction forces. However, rapid reaction forces are totally useless unless we have rapid reaction politicians. That is the only way in which those forces can be effective.

We have heard arguments about legitimacy. I respect, admire and have deep affection for my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). He criticised the use of a resolution which he said is seven years old, but he did so on the basis of a charter that is seven times seven years old. That is questionable logic. My right hon. Friend said that the situation could be resolved by removing sanctions. That will not provide any solutions. The real solution lies in removing weapons of mass

destruction not only from Iraq but from all the countries in the region. So long as Israel has weapons of that type and class, its neighbours will feel threatened by them and will also want to possess such weapons. That is logical. If we do not face up to that, we will not have much chance of progressing any further.

My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) mentioned biological and chemical weapons. Before I close, I must refer to concerns that have been expressed about the prospect of scattering chemical agents and bacteria, such as anthrax, if we seek to bomb Iraq's stockpiles—wherever they are located. That is a genuine fear to which several hon. Members have referred and we know that there is no perfect answer.

If we are to continue the attack and to target those kinds of weapons, I believe that the only means of averting such a colossal dispersal of germs and nerve gas—my plan has a fairly remote chance of success, but it is the best chance—would be to employ the precise placement of laser-guided, bunker-penetrating bombs of a low-yield tactical thermo-nuclear character. The immediate searing temperatures created by such weapons on explosion would provide the best chance of obliterating the germs and dismantling the chemical compounds. I know that it is a hideous thought, but is there not a huge irony in the possible employment of one weapon of mass destruction as a means of destroying another two of an even more hideous character?

We must take stock of what we do and how we do it. That will be a long-term strategy. The moral dilemma posed is a real one of huge moment. One can ponder it sensibly only by engaging a "greater good or lesser evil" approach. Unless we strike a balance between the two extremes, we will not be successful.

8.13 pm

Dr. Julian Lewis (New Forest, East): The hon. Member for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook) has introduced some novel points at a late stage in the debate. I do not wish to be diverted from my main comments by his interesting contribution, but I think that it is unfortunate that the hon. Gentleman has chosen to try to cast Israel as some sort of covert villain in this scenario. It is particularly unrealistic of him to try to use Israel's possession of a deterrent—it is a democratic state that would never envisage using that deterrent unless it was under aggressive attack from someone else—as an excuse or a reason for Saddam Hussein's attempts to develop weapons of mass destruction for his own use.

As for General Scowcroft's rather noncommittal answer when confronted with the hon. Gentleman's convoluted conspiracy theory, all I can say is that that is precisely the sort of answer that I would give to anyone who presented a particularly unbelievable theory in a constituency surgery on a cold Saturday afternoon. I fear that General Scowcroft employed the words he did for the same reason that I employ the words I do under such circumstances. It is rather like the solicitor who, when confronted with an odd opinion, tactfully says, "I hear what you say."

When considering whether to support any military action, one must have three questions answered satisfactorily: is it justified; what is it trying to do; and will it work? I say at the outset that, if there is a vote at the end of this evening's debate, I will—together with all my colleagues on the Opposition Benches, I am sure—vote with the Government, as I did on 17 February. On that occasion, I voted with a degree of reservation, and I will probably have the same reservations tonight because I am not yet convinced that the third of the three questions has been answered satisfactorily.

I shall touch briefly on the first two questions. Is the military action justified? Anyone who has heard the evidence outlined by a variety of hon. Members, particularly the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), cannot have the slightest doubt about the justification of the measures proposed. What is the military action trying to achieve? It is beneficial that the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary made no bones about the fact that air strikes alone will not succeed in removing Saddam Hussein. They said that the action is designed to weaken his military machine and prevent his developing weapons of mass destruction. Rather revealingly—it may have been a throw-away line at the end of his remarks—the Foreign Secretary also said that the aim was to disarm Iraq on the ground from the air.

I fear that that is where the right hon. Gentleman may have problems, because we must then ask: will it work? That depends on whether we believe that Saddam Hussein already has a substantial stock of biological and chemical weapons of mass destruction or whether we think that he is still only trying to amass that stockpile.

On the subject of weapons of mass destruction, a Foreign Office paper on the Iraqi threat and the work of UNSCOM earlier this year stated:

> "One hundred kilograms of anthrax released from the top of a tall building in a densely populated area could kill up to 3 million people."

We have a problem: if Saddam Hussein already has that potential, will air strikes remove it? Although one does not generally agree with the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) about everything, it does not mean that occasionally one should not agree with him about something. On 17 February, he asked a rather pointed question—which he reiterated today, perhaps slightly less pointedly—about what would happen if a bomb hit a stockpile of chemical or biological weapons of mass destruction. On that occasion, the Foreign Secretary replied:

> "We are entirely clear about the dangers of hitting such a stockpile. That is why we have taken great care in our targeting plan to ensure that we do not hit such completed weapons."—[*Official Report*, 17 February 1998; Vol. 306, c. 902.]

Mr. Wareing: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman should refer to the targeting directness of missiles. He may care to know that CBS has just reported that a bomb or missile has hit a hospital in Baghdad.

Dr. Lewis: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention, because one of the points on which I hope to conclude is that it is a big mistake to think that we can have a war without casualties on both sides.

Let us assume for the purposes of the argument that the weapons are sufficiently accurate that we can guarantee that they will miss the stockpiles, if that is our objective. We would have tried to miss the stockpiles in February if we had launched an attack, so presumably we are trying to do the same job in December. It cannot therefore be maintained that one of our aims is to remove Saddam

[Dr. Lewis]

Hussein's stockpiles, if he has them. That is why I look to Ministers to tell us whether we anticipate that Saddam Hussein already has mass destruction weapons or whether, as the Foreign Secretary said earlier, we are simply trying to prevent him from developing the earlier stages in the manufacturing process so that he cannot amass those stockpiles in the future.

I shall not take up much more time because I know that other Members are keen to speak, but I shall refer briefly to points that have been made by authorities on the efficacy of aerial bombardment alone. Earlier this year, the former Gulf war commander-in-chief, Sir Peter de la Billiere, said:

"There are few, if any, examples of air power alone succeeding in defeating and bringing to heel such a determined and resolute enemy as Saddam."

The former Chief of the General Staff, Field Marshal Sir John Stanier, said:

"It is unlikely that air strikes will destroy Saddam's stockpile of weapons or topple him."

What, then, about alternatives? In February, when we faced exactly the same situation, Professor Lawrence Freedman, a well-known academic strategist, said:

"the Allies are in an awkward position because they are forced to rely solely on air power . . . Sending troops into Iraq would be an altogether more serious operation . . . Yet it may well be that the best way to convince the Iraqi leader . . . would be to announce the sending of a US Marine taskforce to the Gulf."

I do not want to sound like a latter-day convert to pacifism or disarmament. Members change sides of the House and Governments change, too. I recall that, at the time of the first Gulf war, several members of this Government were wholly opposed to bombing Baghdad on perfectly respectable, or at least arguable, grounds. One of those Members was the current Foreign Secretary, who criticised the bombing of Baghdad in the first Gulf war as making it

"more difficult to achieve peace and security."

At that time, when ground troops were involved, we had a workable plan, which the present Foreign Secretary opposed. Now that we have a plan that is not, I fear, entirely workable, he supports it.

I draw different conclusions from those of hon. Members on the left of the Government Benches who have been nodding in agreement with some of my points about stockpiles. Their argument is that we should do nothing at all. My argument is that, if we are going to do something, we must do something that will be effective. If we will the ends, we must will the means. We cannot have war on the cheap. We cannot have war without casualties, and it is no good saying, in a latter-day version of what people said in 1914, "It'll all be over by Ramadan," because it will not.

We are unwise to be saying in advance that we shall not continue fighting the war into Ramadan—because that sends a signal to Saddam Hussein that he has only to hang on for a certain number of days and the bombardment will cease. If we are serious about taking out his potential to use mass destruction weapons, we must recognise that air power alone will be insufficient. Aid to the resistance alone will be insufficient. The only way to deal with this menace to the security of the region and, possibly, to world security is the use of ground forces. If we are not prepared to consider that, it is very debatable what else we should be doing.

8.24 pm

Mr. David Winnick (Walsall, North): We all wish that military action could have been avoided. No one who supports the Government's action wishes to gloat or be happy about the situation.

I do not determine my views on a major issue such as this on the basis of "my Government right or wrong". If I concluded that the Government's action was wrong, I would with the greatest reluctance make my views clear and vote accordingly. I do not criticise Members on the basis of how they vote—that is their business. Unlike Iraq, this is a free country and, fortunately, this is also a free Parliament.

In the circumstances, the action that began last night is absolutely essential. If, in view of all the warnings that have been given since February, no action had been taken when the Baghdad regime made it clear once again that the inspectors would not be able to do their job, what credibility would the allies have had? Should there have been more warnings and more meetings with the Secretary-General of the United Nations? If the Governments had not taken this action, we would have surrendered our position entirety.

None of the hon. Members who have been critical has put forward an alternative other than the only alternative possible at the time of the invasion of Kuwait—surrender. I was present during those debates in 1990 and 1991 and participated in some of them. Hon. Members were opposed to military action to liberate Kuwait and some, including many of those who are now most ardently opposed to sanctions, argued for sanctions at that time. If we had listened to those critics, Kuwait would never have been liberated. There is no way that sanctions would have led to Kuwait being freed. Was it right to liberate that country? Yes, it was absolutely right.

Why do not those who are so critical of the British and American Governments put the blame where it belongs? Why do they not say that Saddam Hussein has had every opportunity, this year and beforehand, to make sure that the United Nations inspectors could do their work? Why, time and again, is every accusation, criticism and downright slur made against the leadership of the United States and Britain, while there is no criticism whatsoever of the butcher who rules in Baghdad?

In an intervention, I quoted the remarks of the hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway). I did not do so because I am engaged in a personal feud; I could not care less about such matters. He often says that he has good credentials as a long-time opponent of Saddam Hussein. That may well be so, and some Conservative Members may not be in that position. However, I quoted what my hon. Friend said in Baghdad in 1994 in a face-to-face confrontation with Saddam Hussein. I repeat, he said:

"Sir, I salute your courage, your strength . . . and I want you to know we are with you until victory."

Victory? What sort of victory? We are dealing with a butcher. Enough has been said today and it can only be repeated that Saddam Hussein has committed the most terrifying crimes against his own people.

We are lectured about civilian casualties. I am concerned about that, and I heard what my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) said in an intervention a moment ago. It is absolutely essential to minimise civilian casualties, although I agree that it is impossible to wage a war with any guarantee that civilians will not be hit. However, we are dealing with a murderous dictator who initiated the war against Iran in which tens of thousands—possibly hundreds of thousands—of Iraqis and Iranians died. Is he in a position to lecture us?

Saddam Hussein carried out poison gas attacks against the Kurds in 1988. He invaded Kuwait and caused the events that followed. There is brutality in Iraq, day in and day out, including the execution of prisoners, torture and amputation, yet a Member of the House of Commons can say:

"Sir, I salute your courage . . . we are with you until victory."

Mr. Mohammad Sarwar (Glasgow, Govan): Does my hon. Friend accept that, when Saddam Hussein initiated the war against Iran and used chemical weapons against it and his own people, Britain and the United States supported him?

Mr. Winnick: Yes, I cannot deny that my hon. Friend makes a valid point. I wish one could say that this country consistently opposed Saddam Hussein, but that is not so. I hope that I, many of my Labour colleagues, some in the Liberal ranks and the nationalists are in a different position from many Conservatives who found excuses for Saddam Hussein. I wish that I could say that the United States had a consistent record of opposing him, but that is far from the truth. I have to say to my hon. Friend that one could have argued in 1939 that, because the western powers to a certain extent helped to arm Hitler and gave political support to the Nazi regime, we should not have gone to war. As I said in 1990, when the time came, during the invasion of Kuwait, at least the western powers woke up. Incidentally, we were not one of the worst offenders—in all fairness, France, Germany and some others were worse.

Ms Oona King (Bethnal Green and Bow): Is it not the general inconsistency that hangs over the United Nations' and the international community's approach to violations of human rights that puts us in this more difficult position now? Although I agree with the position of my hon. Friend and the Government, it has been undermined by the fact that we seem on occasion to have been influenced by oil as well as other factors.

Mr. Winnick: If oil was the only reason that we went to war in 1991, thank heavens that that was so—nothing would have been worse than if we had allowed the invasion of Kuwait to take place without our taking action. What would have happened? We know how Saddam Hussein operates. If he had got away with the invasion of Kuwait, he would have been encouraged to invade other countries.

Mr. Wareing: My hon. Friend has drawn a comparison between 1939 and now. People are asking what alternative there is to the bombing. I supported the attack to drive Iraq out of Kuwait, but I suggest that we would not have defeated Germany in 1945 without massive armed troops on the ground. If we really want to get rid of Saddam, the real alternative is that mentioned by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis). Had we taken that option in 1991, we would not have this problem now.

Mr. Winnick: It is perfectly true that ordinary people asked then, and are no doubt asking now, why we did not finish the job then. The job then was the liberation of Kuwait. Although I would have liked to see the liberation of Iraq in 1991, there was no mandate for that—we should bear that very much in mind. I do not think that members of the alliance, particularly countries in the Arab world, would have gone along with us. Whether we should escalate the armed conflict along the lines suggested by the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis), I have considerable doubts.

Mr. Cohen: My hon. Friend said that he would like to see Iraq liberated. Would he like to see it liberated by Iran?

Mr. Winnick: No, I would not like to see it liberated by Iran, but the Iraqi regime is so horrifying and brutal and has inflicted so much terror on its own people that I certainly want Iraq liberated from Saddam Hussein, and I make no apologies for that. Far from being ashamed of my view, I am proud of it. I hope that my hon. Friend agrees with me about that.

Using whatever ammunition they can find, some critics are saying that these events are a plot to save Clinton—perhaps they have seen too many recent American films. My response is to ask: where is the evidence that the Republicans, who have been waging a campaign against the American President, are going to drop the motion to impeach him? All the indications are that they are going to continue. It will be difficult to persuade people that the American President is conspiring with UN inspectors, the British Government and other countries to save his political skin.

There were two main objectives after the invasion of Kuwait in August 1990. The first was the ending of the enemy occupation, which was achieved. The second was the destruction of the weapons of mass destruction. I believe that, for all the reasons set out by many hon. Members, we should be as single-minded about that objective as we were about Kuwait.

I want to give other hon. Members the opportunity to speak, so I conclude with two points. Labour has a reputation of being against despots and mass murderers. I hope that I am in order when I say that it would be very difficult to find a single Labour Member who does not want to see Pinochet brought to justice. We are against such criminals, even if their criminal deeds ended a few years ago. The vast majority of Labour Members have such strong views about dictators, so there is no reason that our view on Saddam Hussein should be different.

I understand that some of my hon. Friends have reservations—some are pacifists—and are deeply worried, as we all are, about innocent people being killed. However, we should not forget that this party, before the second world war and since, has had a consistent record of opposing criminal dictators, and long may it be so.

The British people do not like war. As I said, they are not clapping their hands or gloating, and they are not refraining from doing so simply because it is the

[Mr. Winnick]

Christmas period. They are always concerned about casualties, British casualties and those in the country being bombed. I take the view—we shall see whether I am right in the next few days and weeks—that what has been done has the overwhelming support of the British people. They know what sort of person Saddam Hussein is; they know how he has cheated and murdered over the years; and they know that he cannot be relied on. I believe that, when we vote overwhelming in support of the Government tonight, we shall be speaking to the large majority of the British people.

8.37 pm

Mr. David Heath (Somerton and Frome): I must first tell the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the right hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), how much I personally appreciate the fact that the Foreign Secretary and the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the hon. Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd), were able to attend the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs yesterday, when they must have had many more serious matters on their mind.

The hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) has made clear what was also apparent from all the speeches this evening—that there is no support in the House for military action for its own sake. I detect no sense of jingoism or bombast. Instead, there is a strong reluctance—rightly so—to use military means as a way of achieving international justice. International justice is the universal wish.

I listened carefully to hon. Members for whom I have the deepest personal respect, such as the hon. Members for Tatton (Mr. Bell) and for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell). I hear what they say about some of us being of a generation that has not seen combat and, indeed, that cannot have seen combat. There was an implication that perhaps that makes it easier for us to support military action. I believe that the reverse is true.

Many Labour and Liberal Members grew up in a political atmosphere that strongly opposed war and everything associated with it and that saw war very much as a last resort. I spent my college years in the same college as the Prime Minister, and I know that the atmosphere in which we grew up makes it more difficult to conclude that military force is the right solution. It takes more moral courage to come to that view. It is easier to follow one's instincts and say that military force is not the right solution. Yet, on occasions, when crimes are committed, it is not right simply to say that it is somebody else's business, that somebody else can call the police, that somebody else can deal with it. The right thing is to screw up one's courage and intervene. That is what Britain is doing.

I find it odd that hon. Members who applauded the Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, when he returned from Iraq with a memorandum of understanding a few months ago, are now prepared to stand by and allow that memorandum of understanding to be ripped up in the face of the United Nations, just as every previous agreement that Saddam Hussein has made with the international community has been. Time and again, we have been asked to stay our hand to give the man another chance. Time and again, he has taken advantage of that.

I have listened with great care to all speeches. Not once in a speech by a hon. Member who opposes the Government's action have I heard an alternative strategy that would maintain the rule of international law. Not once have I heard another way in which to bring matters to a successful conclusion, other than from the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn), who said that we should remove sanctions and that, somehow, that would bring Saddam Hussein to his senses. I do not believe it.

Mr. Gordon Prentice (Pendle): It is not true that an alternative has not been posed. The hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) explained perfectly clearly that it should be a central policy objective to get rid of Saddam Hussein. That is an alternative, although one must will the means. In 1991, the decision was taken not to go after Saddam Hussein, for geopolitical reasons. People were afraid that Iraq would fracture, a new Kurdistan would be created and that that would destabilise Turkey.

Mr. Heath: I do not regard as an alternative strategy to military action larger recourse to military means, such as the hon. Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) described. A perversity that passeth my understanding is that arms should only ever be used by murderous tyrants of the kind whom we see in Iraq. That is a logical somersault that I am not prepared to make.

Having said that, I am concerned by the argument advanced by some hon. Members and in the United States of America that this limited military operation's objectives could be extended to the removal of Saddam Hussein by military means. The House should not misunderstand me; I would welcome, as I believe would almost every hon. Member, an outcome that resulted in the removal of Saddam Hussein. As an outcome, that is very much to be welcomed. No one who has any regard for the lives and histories of Kurds, Shi'ites, Kuwaitis and any vestige of political opposition in Iraq could fail to conclude that Saddam Hussein should be removed, and quickly. I agree entirely with the hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) that he should be indicted for his many crimes against humanity.

Removal of Saddam Hussein cannot be an objective of this military operation. First, it would be impractical; it is not a realistic objective of the military resources available. Secondly—this is extremely important—it would be without a mandate. I for one will stand on what is legitimate under UN resolutions, and I will not go beyond that until there is a new UN resolution. There is a clear mandate in UN resolutions 687 and 688 for what the United States and the United Kingdom are doing, as my hon. and learned Friend the Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) explained. At the moment, there is not an international sanction—nor is there likely to be—for the removal of Saddam Hussein as a Head of Government in Iraq, however odious we may consider him. Therefore, if that became an objective, it would change legitimate action in international law to a simple act of war. We should not encompass that in this House.

There is legitimacy to the proposed action, and for that reason, Liberal Democrat Members will support it. The action, however, must be accompanied by the continuation of the diplomatic offensive which has been waged over recent months—and redoubled. We must re-establish the coalition of interest that was established during the Gulf war. Some will be very reluctant to join that alliance.

I had the good fortune a few weeks ago to lunch with members of two of the permanent members of the Security Council. I will not reveal what Mr. Sergei Lavrov and Mr. Dejammet said in confidence, because that would be inappropriate. It was, however, clear that France and Russia were not reconciled at the time to the view that military action was appropriate. None the less, the alternatives that the French and Russian Governments have produced have not worked. Their diplomatic offensives have not resulted in reductions in the weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. Therefore, we must ask them, as we are asking in the House: what is the alternative strategy?

We must develop a strategy beyond these strikes. I hope that we shall always maintain the view, and make it clear to Iraq, that, the moment that it complies with UN resolutions, we are prepared to do what we are conditioned to do under the resolutions: remove the sanctions. Indeed, there is some scope for lifting the International Atomic Energy Authority part of the inspection programme at an early stage, if only Iraq would comply. We must consider the effectiveness of the sanction regime.

Later—not now—we must remind our allies in the United States that the United Nations can never be a flag of convenience for its actions and that, much as we welcome the United States' actions in support of UN resolutions, its money in support of the United Nations and its active support of equivalence of attitude to countries, especially in the middle east, would be equally welcome.

I hope that we all regret—perhaps regret is too weak a word—that military action at this stage is required. We should not forget where the responsibility for that action lies: with the regime in Iraq. We can express the hope that the Government will be firm but proportionate in the way in which they apply military action but, at the end of the day, we must agree that the Government are right in such action. I hope that we shall never forget the interests of the service men and women who are active on behalf of this country and international law at this time. At the moment, only RAF personnel are involved but, in future, my constituents from Fleet Air Arm in Yeovilton could be, too. I wish our service men and women well tonight and in the days to come, and hope that they return safely to their bases with the job well done.

8.48 pm

Mrs. Alice Mahon (Halifax): This is a grave debate, as some speeches have reflected. I was very saddened by the tabloid language of my hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours); that did not do the debate any good. It is offensive to say that people who have a different opinion on bombing are apologists for Saddam Hussein. Some of us have a long record of opposing Saddam Hussein—even when it was not terribly popular to do so. The one thing that undoubtedly unites us is that Saddam Hussein is a ruthless dictator who has produced and used dangerous weapons against his own and other people. We are all united in condemning him on that.

As we are aware, not all United Nations resolutions are upheld. If the answer to enforcement of such resolutions was to bomb the country of every violator, about half the world would be laid to waste by cruise missiles—from Israel to Kashmir, from East Timor to Saudi Arabia. There seem to be double standards concerning United Nations resolutions.

Morally, I cannot support the bombing of Iraq. I do not believe that we have the authority of the United Nations to undertake this action. It is a hideous action, and it does not advance the cause of the long-suffering Iraqi people one iota. Instead, it punishes them further. They did not elect Saddam Hussein. They had no say when he took them to war with Iran and a whole generation of young men were wiped out, and he certainly did not consult them when he invaded Kuwait. Yet we penalise those unfortunate victims of an evil regime by killing them with our bombs.

I ask the Government, what will the bombing achieve? Is it not the same, failed, approach that the west adopted during the Gulf war? We did not get rid of Saddam Hussein then. We killed hundreds and thousands of Iraqis. I do not forget the road to Basra and the description, put so eloquently by Edward Pierce, of the "Jack Frost face" of the young Kurdish recruit who was frozen by the smart bombs there—frozen for ever.

We killed hundreds of Iraqis, but Saddam Hussein remained more powerful, and more secure, than ever. At the time, some people, as they are doing now, encouraged armed opposition to his regime, and we stood by while he ruthlessly put down the uprisings, from the Kurds in the north to the marsh Arabs in the south. I have not forgotten the terrible pictures of Kurds dying on the freezing mountains as they fled, terrified, from the Republican Guard. My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who is not in the Chamber now, went to see for herself and give witness to the heartbreaking scenes that she saw on those mountains. She moved the House with her descriptions.

During the Gulf war, we had massive support from other countries. Where is that support now? I did not vote for the Gulf war, but there was massive support from other countries. Where is it now? Only Britain and the United States support the bombing. China, Russia and France oppose it. Why did we not go back to the Security Council with the inspectors' report? Where is the support from Arab countries? The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) put it well when he said, "Study the silences." At the time of the Gulf war, we were at least offering the Palestinians a peace process. We can all see what has happened to the peace process now.

I briefly mention the role of the President of the United States. I have always believed that those in America who want to impeach the President for a love affair that he lied about are at best stupid and at worst the type of right-wing fundamentalist Christian that I detest almost as much as the Islamic Taliban. However, a question remains as to the timing of this bombing. Today, the House of Representatives was going to vote on four impeachment charges against the President, and it looked as though impeachment would go ahead. Postponement puts off impeachment and, if the bombing continues for a few days and Capitol Hill closes down and reopens in the new year with a new Congress and a new Judiciary Committee, the President has a much better chance of breaking impeachment charges.

If—I only say if—the bombing has been somehow manipulated for the political expedience of the President, I believe that it will go down in history as an act of

[Mrs. Alice Mahon]

unspeakable wickedness because, as we speak tonight, real men, women and children are dying. Innocents who have led miserable lives under Saddam Hussein will suffer even more.

The Prime Minister said last night:

"Our quarrel is not with the Iraqi people."

Those who know the Prime Minister know that he speaks from the heart when he says that. I do not doubt his sincerity. But bombs do not discriminate between the good and the bad; in any case, the bad will probably have a very good shelter. It will be the poor and the oppressed who will be killed. As my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Mr. Wareing) said, a hospital has been hit tonight. As we approach Christmas and I look at the lovely, happy anticipation on my grandchildren's faces, I think of the children of Iraq, who await Ramadan with the same innocent, happy expectation. How many of those will lose their parents or loved ones because of our actions, and how many will grow up hating the west and joining the Islamists?

Has any thought been given to what will happen next if Saddam Hussein does not comply? Are we going to bomb again; and, if he carries on saying no to the inspectors, will we bomb again? Will the Minister tell us, will we bomb and bomb until we really do bomb Iraq into the stone age? How many will die? I ask—as did my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell)—what will happen if we hit a chemical or biological plant. We have heard the horrifying details.

What about the stability of the area? Iran, which is hardly a good role model for upholding democratic values, is poised to benefit. I do not conform to the notion that Muhammad Khatami's election will transform Iran. On the contrary; I believe that the grave and systematic violations of human rights—including public executions, torture, stoning and arbitrary arrests—continue unabated in that unhappy country. In recent years, more than 20 Iranian dissidents have been assassinated abroad. Does anyone seriously believe that Iran's mullahs, with their dream of an Islamic world, would not take advantage of a divided and bombed-out Iraq?

We look the other way as the Iranians develop their weapons, and they are certainly developing weapons. It is said that they have missiles that can reach into Europe. I do not think that we should bomb them, either. I agree with the Foreign Secretary when he tries to open up dialogue with them. I think that that is the way forward.

I also think that the Arab nations and the long-suffering Palestinians gasp at the lack of any action against Netanyahu and his scuppering of the peace process. There is no insistence on the upholding of UN resolutions there.

What about Kashmir—subject of the oldest resolution on the United Nations' books? That resolution actually supports self-determination, and so do I. What about the people of Kashmir? Pakistan and India have weapons of mass destruction, but we are not suggesting that we should go in there and bomb them.

Some of my colleagues have asked, "What would you do?" and there was some heckling, asking, "What is the alternative?" Well, I certainly would not make Saddam Hussein into a martyr and strengthen his position even more. We should negotiate and try to isolate him. We trade with other dictators. We traded with Indonesia when Suharto murdered a third of the population of East Timor; we went further, and sold him weapons. We maintain friendly relations with Israel and try to get the peace process going there. The Foreign Secretary even met the mullahs in Iran. We do not bomb those and other such regimes; we keep trying to talk to them. History shows that tyrants will eventually be toppled by their own people, if given the right help.

The main reason why I do not believe in the bombing strategy is that I do not think that it will succeed. We shall just kill ordinary, innocent people and make the suffering a lot worse. This morning, John Nicol, an ex-RAF pilot from the Gulf War Veterans, said:

"I believe it is ludicrous to try to bring down Saddam Hussein. This will change nothing. We launched the biggest air Armada the world has ever seen during the Gulf War, and we did not destroy Saddam then. So I think that we are unlikely to do it now."

I agree, and I ask the Secretary of State again: what next, when we have bombed?

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister rightly praised our forces. I join him in that. I want them to be safe, but I do not believe that this military action is morally right. If there is an opportunity to do so, I will vote against it tonight.

8.58 pm

Mr. Crispin Blunt (Reigate): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Lady, who has a distinguished record in support for human rights. She wrestled in her speech this evening with the difficulty of what to do about Saddam Hussein, while properly recognising the nature of the regime. The previous Labour Member who spoke was the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) who, I am sorry to see, is not in his place. He is consistent in his desire to use military force in pursuit of the desired outcome, but I just wish that, while willing the aims, he would will the means, and vote for defence expenditure that would support the military power that he always wants the United Kingdom to use.

Some Labour Members, including the hon. Members for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) and for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), seem to deny the nature of the regime with which we are dealing. This is not a popular democracy with just an unusually robust criminal justice policy; it is a regime of terror. The hon. Member for Kelvin should agree that the Ba'ath party apparatus now operated by the Takriti gang in Iraq bears no recognisable relation to a proper Ba'ath or Arab philosophy.

The hon. Member for Linlithgow said that the next generation of Iraqis would not forgive us for what we were doing. It is much more likely that they would not forgive us for failing to rid them of the regime of terror under which they are suffering. That would be the crime of the west.

We face today three options, the first of which is to do nothing. The hon. Member for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon) is an advocate of that option, as is the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn). But are we to allow the dictator in Baghdad to continue to challenge the world community? He is not only a threat but someone who has a record of using weapons of mass destruction. He is a danger not only to his neighbours, but to the peace and stability of the world.

If we are going to act, we are left with two other options. One is a ground attack on Iraq to complete the job that in 1991 was, for reasons that I supported, not undertaken. We did not have the formal authority to do so and people felt that Saddam was going to fall. The Marsh Arabs were encouraged to rise, but Saddam did not fall. That had bitter and horrendous consequences for the Marsh Arabs in southern Iraq.

The ground attack option, as the only means of definitively removing Saddam from power, would require the support of the Arab world and coalition that we had in place in 1991. At the moment, that coalition is hardly enthusiastic in support of the west. If we are not in a position to launch a ground attack—I believe that, without the support of the Arab world, that option is ruled out—we are left with the option that the Government are pursuing today and that I support. We are trying to degrade Saddam's capability of making weapons of mass destruction. That strategy comes with a series of long-term problems, which the Prime Minister recognised in his statement to the House. He said that it was likely that we would be without the services of the UNSCOM inspectors in future. So our best source of intelligence about the weapons programmes would be denied to us. On the basis of other, less good, sources of intelligence and information, we would have to be prepared in the long term to use military force to suppress that programme. We have embarked on a long-term strategy and we shall need the long-term support of the Arab world.

It is my concern that within the Arab world there is a real and, in a sense, proper perception of double standards—that there is one rule for Iraq and quite another for Israel. I impress on the Government the point that the success of the middle east peace process is essential to the interests of the United Kingdom, the United States and all the liberal democracies in the action that is being taken and our position in the middle east. If Benyamin Netanyahu is allowed to get away with continuing to obstruct the path to peace and a settlement in Israel and Palestine, if he is allowed to obstruct the legitimate right of the Palestinians to aspire to self-government in the territory recognised under UN Security Council resolution 242 as properly belonging to them, we will never be in a position to sustain the long-term Arab coalition that we require to deal with the brutal dictator in Baghdad.

I urge the Government to use their influence on the United States to ensure that it is made clear to Prime Minister Netanyahu that he is not only dealing with the interests of Israel, but playing with the interests of all the liberal democracies in his conduct of negotiations with the Palestinians. I hope that the Government will impress on him what is at stake.

9.5 pm

Ms Rachel Squire (Dunfermline, West): I accept the points made by the hon. Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) and others about the complexities of the present foreign policy strategy towards the middle east. I want to go on record as saying that I entirely agreed with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister last night when he said in his announcement at No. 10 that he believed that there was no realistic alternative to carrying out immediate bombing action against Iraq and Saddam Hussein.

I accept that the gains from such action are not entirely predictable, but when would any military commander or senior politician claim to predict with certainty the outcome of a course of action? My hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) spoke powerfully and, I hope, persuaded many that we cannot continue to allow such an evil dictator to amass chemical, biological and nuclear weapons and the means to produce them.

There is continuing discussion about whether we should extend our air power and bring in land forces, but I have yet to hear from those who oppose the action taken by the Government a reasonable and realistic alternative strategy for dealing with Saddam Hussein and the evil dictatorship that he represents.

Mr. Corbyn *rose—*

Mr. Barnes *rose—*

Ms Squire: I am happy to give way if my hon. Friends want to suggest a realistic alternative strategy.

Mr. Barnes: An alternative strategy was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). As an add-on to the current strategy of bombing, she suggested that action should be taken to help the political opposition to the Iraqi regime to gain strength so that in time they can take over, and that Saddam Hussein should be indicted. That is an alternative position, although it may not have been propounded by those who oppose the bombing.

Ms Squire: I see that proposal as additional to the action undertaken by the Government. It certainly will not prevent Saddam Hussein from continuing to amass weapons of mass destruction, or deny him the licence to kill whomever he wants, however he wants, whenever he wishes to do so. He has demonstrated his willingness to use such weapons.

I emphasise that I am not an uncritical supporter of the President of the United States, but I thought that he was right in his address to the American nation last night, when he said that Saddam Hussein had been given more than one chance, not the licence that he was seeking. I have yet to hear an alternative strategy to make Saddam Hussein comply with UNSCOM and co-operate fully with the UN inspectors, as he committed himself to do just over a month ago, in return for force not being used.

Mr. Corbyn: Is my hon. Friend not concerned that President Clinton, in his speech last night, considerably widened the objectives beyond any that existed before? If he is to topple the regime and install a new Government, it will be done not by air power but by the commitment of ground troops. Is my hon. Friend not concerned that we might be embarking on a long-term conflict, with a huge deployment of ground and air forces, the outcome of which is uncertain, apart from a vast number of Iraqi military and civilian casualties?

Ms Squire: I share the concerns of all hon. Members about possible casualties and, as I said at the start, I am also concerned that such actions can have no certain outcome. However, that is true of any military and political strategy.

However, I am disappointed that my hon. Friend did not suggest a suitable alternative strategy, apart from that of sitting back and allowing Saddam Hussein, for the

[Ms Squire]

fourth time in 12 months, to give two fingers to the United Nations, the values, moral base and principles of which, in its efforts to secure peace, freedom and security for the peoples of the world, all hon. Members say that they support.

I, too, have been somewhat surprised at the suggestion that the President of the United States is seeking to put the interests of domestic politics above those of the international scene. As I have said, I am not an uncritical supporter of President Clinton and, like other hon. Members, I, too, can be somewhat cynical about the motives of some politicians. From my knowledge of American politics, I believe that there is no greater political risk for any American President than to endanger the lives of American service men. In the past, the American public have shown clearly how much they will criticise and demand an explanation for any loss of life in their armed forces.

I cannot and do not believe that the publication of the UNSCOM report was somehow engineered, that it just happened to come out in the week when it would be to the convenience of the President of the United States. I do not believe that the President of the United States acted with anything less than the sincerity that he expressed in his address to the nation.

Another objection has been that we should have delayed. Apparently, we should have said that we were wondering whether to go ahead and bomb Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime, but that we should have a debate in the House before going ahead. I cannot think of anything more likely to put our armed forces at greater risk.

I have been present at previous debates when we agreed that, in the event that Saddam Hussein did not carry out his commitment to full compliance and co-operation with UNSCOM and the United Nations, Britain and the American Government would respond with swift and immediate action.

We can speculate about Saddam Hussein's motives in throwing down yet another gauntlet in the week before Ramadan and the main Christian festival, and whether he thought that that would result in a delay which he could use further to conceal and remove the weapons that he did not want the UN inspectors to find.

Criticisms have been made of the independence or authenticity of the UNSCOM report presented by Mr. Butler. Some have said that it is biased and inaccurate. I should like to know where they got their evidence. I am aware of no evidence of willing compliance with the United Nations by Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi regime in the past eight years. Some have said that there is a need to establish clearer rules for UNSCOM's activities. Bluntly, Saddam Hussein has had plenty of opportunities, if he was willing to take them, to sit at the table and discuss with the United Nations the clear rules under which effective inspections could be carried out. He has demonstrated clearly that he is unwilling to do that.

One reason why the British Government were right to take action in the past 24 to 48 hours is very much connected with the credibility of the United Nations, its future role in worldwide peace and security and the removal of dictators. We should remember that Saddam Hussein has consistently shown his unwillingness to uphold those principles and values. He is concerned with oppressing and murdering the people who are unfortunate enough to live within his territory and he has demonstrated his determination to extend its boundaries. I have no doubt that, if he thought that it would further his political power-seeking ends, he would use any weapons that he had managed to conceal from the United Nations against anyone whom he disliked or who had displeased him.

The House should send a message tonight that the vast majority of right hon. and hon. Members fully support the action taken by the British and American Governments and that we support and acknowledge the courage and commitment of our armed forces and their professionalism and skill. Our hearts go out to them and to their families, who are sitting at home watching television and dreading it when the phone rings, as that might bring the worst news.

Hon. Members must say clearly that the British Government are demonstrating our determination and commitment to a genuine role in future for the United Nations, that we are seeking to build a stable and secure world for the next millennium and that we will take whatever action is necessary within our parliamentary and democratic traditions to give due notice to Saddam Hussein and all the other evil dictators in the world that their time has come. If they show their unwillingness to comply with the United Nations and all that it stands for, we shall use all necessary force to ensure that they do so.

Mr. Galloway: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Three times in the course of this debate—once this afternoon and twice this evening—the hon. Member for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) has launched a bitter, personal attack on me, which included attributing to me a totally false quotation. I did not rise to contradict it because I hoped to catch your eye in the six and a half hours that I have sat here. However, as I have not been called, would you advise me what remedy I have, as an hon. Member of this House, for a baseless, personal slur which was launched against me by another Member, to which I have not had the opportunity to reply?

Mr. Winnick: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker (Mr. Michael Lord): Order. I think that I have heard enough to deal with that matter. It is not a point of order for the Chair, but the hon. Gentleman has now had his say.

Mr. Winnick *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have dealt with that point of order. I call Mr. Maples.

9.21 pm

Mr. John Maples (Stratford-on-Avon): About 10 days ago, we had a defence debate and I told the Secretary of State that it was the eighth day of defence debates since 19 October, which was a few too many. Here we are back again a few days later. On none of those occasions, however, did we discuss a matter as important as this, with British troops about to go into action in the Gulf.

Given that our armed forces are about to be asked to go into action, they deserve to know that the country and the House are wholly behind them. The tenor of this debate has clearly shown that that is so, and I am delighted that all those who have spoken on the Opposition Benches were supportive of the Government, including my right hon. Friend the Shadow Foreign Secretary.

Most of those on the Labour Benches, including the hon. Members for Walsall, South (Mr. George), for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson), for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook), for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and for Dunfermline, West (Ms Squire), were wholly supportive of the Government's position.

The hon. and learned Member for North-East Fife (Mr. Campbell) put his finger on the crux of this matter, which is that Saddam Hussein wants to dominate the region. That is why we all feel that it is appropriate to have pursued the action that has been pursued in the past few years since the Gulf war—*[Interruption.]*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. An electronic device has gone off in the Chamber. Hon. Members must either learn to switch those off before they come into the Chamber or leave them outside the Chamber.

Mr. Maples: Saddam's desire to dominate the region is at the crux of this matter, just as it was at the crux of the Gulf war. The west has vital interests in the region for a variety of reasons. Clearly, had Iraq got away with the invasion of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia would have been next, and he would soon have dominated the whole Gulf and the world's oil supplies. He would have become not just a threat to the rest of the region, but a violent, evil threat, armed with weapons of mass destruction. Those ambitions are not yet dead, which is one of the reasons why the Government's action is appropriate.

The Conservative Members who spoke all supported the Government's position. They made various points. My hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Sir R. Whitney) said that it is unrealistic to restrict oneself to basing all military action on UN resolutions. There are bound to be times when that is impossible and when it would paralyse our ability and that of our allies to take appropriate action, or delay it to the point when it was bound to lose much of its effectiveness.

My hon. Friend the Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) discussed the possible dangers imposed by the onset of Ramadan. I shall return to that and ask the Secretary of State's views on it. My hon. Friend the Member for Canterbury (Mr. Brazier), while making his usual eloquent pitch for the Territorial Army, cast doubts on the efficacy of using air power alone, a view shared by my hon. Friend the Member for New Forest, East (Dr. Lewis) and others.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Sir J. Stanley) talked about chemical and biological weapons and their dangers, and my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Mr. Blunt) drew attention to what he considered to be the double standard applied to Iraq and to Israel. He said that, with today's operation, we had embarked on a long-term policy whose implementation would be dangerous and difficult.

The debate came to life with the speech by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and the response that it provoked from my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King). They put forward the alternative opinions evident in the House, although those hon. Members who side with the right hon. Member for Chesterfield form a very small minority. However, the right hon. Gentleman could not have expressed his views more eloquently or passionately, and he provoked an equally eloquent and passionate response from my right hon. Friend.

The right hon. Member for Chesterfield led a significant group of Labour Members opposed to Government policy. Among those whose dissent was visible to me were the hon. Members for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway), for Falkirk, West (Mr. Canavan), for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell), for Islington, North (Mr. Corbyn) and for Halifax (Mrs. Mahon).

Mr. Galloway: I want to point out that I did not speak in the debate, as I was not called.

Mr. Maples: The hon. Gentleman spoke in response to the Prime Minister's statement, and on several occasions he indicated his dissent. The diatribes that he provoked from some other Labour Members made his opinion on the matter pretty clear.

I was surprised by the stance of the hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell), which appeared to be that the United States and the United Kingdom should not intervene in circumstances such as obtain in Iraq and should not act as the world's police. That seems to sit rather strangely with the line that the hon. Gentleman took over Bosnia, when he used his position as a reporter to call for and promote intervention by the United States and the United Kingdom. I am not sure that the circumstances are as different as would be necessary if he were going to be able to sustain his argument.

The argument advanced by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield and those who agree with him deserves to be answered. I shall try to do so, but I hope that the Secretary of State for Defence will do so as well. When Members on both Front Benches agree, there is a danger that minority opinions do not get answered. However wrong one considers them to be, they are entitled to a response.

The speech by the right hon. Member for Chesterfield was rather like the speeches of the late Enoch Powell, which required intent listening, offered a series of propositions and eventually ended with a conclusion with which one completely disagreed. At that point, one realised that somewhere along the way one must have been tricked by the logic. The right hon. Gentleman achieved the same feat, very eloquently and passionately.

The right hon. Gentleman seemed to make two specific points: first, that, in the absence of agreement under article 46 of the United Nations charter, the action was illegal; secondly, that it was anyway immoral to bomb in circumstances where there might be civilian damage and casualties. The point about the legality of the action seemed to imply that it would be all right if there had been an appropriate United Nations resolution. However, I do not understand how the absence or presence of such a resolution could determine whether the action was moral.

Mr. Dalyell: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr. Maples: I shall finish this point. If the attack was immoral, I do not see how a United Nations resolution

[Mr. Maples]

could have made it moral. That apparent inconsistency in the morality argument means that it can be exploded pretty effectively. It is an argument against military action anywhere, at any time and in any circumstances.

That inconsistency was pointed out in a trenchant intervention by the hon. Member for Shipley (Mr. Leslie). He crippled the argument of the right hon. Gentleman for Chesterfield simply by asking what the right hon. Gentleman would do. The right hon. Gentleman fell back on some rather legalistic points, but essentially there is no answer to the question. Those who say that the Government and the action being pursued are wrong can, perfectly justifiably, be asked what they would do, but they never have an alternative to offer. They must accept that the result of having no alternative policy and of not pursuing the action that is proposed would be that Saddam Hussein would be left in place, in relatively peaceful circumstances, to pursue his policy of arming himself with weapons of mass destruction, thus posing an even greater threat to the peace of the region than at present.

Mr. Dalyell: Before we leave the question of morality, the hon. Gentleman will not have had the opportunity to see the film footage being shown tonight of the annihilation of parts of Baghdad. It is really vomit-making. It is pretty terrible to think that we are responsible, and that is a moral question.

Mr. Maples: I must say that I wonder whether this is just Iraqi—

Mr. Campbell-Savours *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. It is not possible to intervene on an intervention.

Mr. Maples: I am happy to give way and let them argue with each other, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: May I correct the record? My hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) is exaggerating. What we have seen on television in the last hour is the very effective selective bombing of military establishments on the outskirts of Baghdad. We are all very thankful for it—as, indeed, will be people in the surrounding countries.

Mr. Maples: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has dealt with the intervention of the hon. Member for Linlithgow better than I could have. However, one of the things that concern me about the pictures that we shall see in the press and on television is the fact that many of them will be Iraqi propaganda. Journalists will not be able to go freely where they want to go. I hope that the media will not continue to fall for that propaganda, as they already seem to be doing. For instance, on the front page of the *Evening Standard* is a colour photograph of an injured man, but we do not know that he was injured in a bombing raid. The editors of newspapers, and of radio and television programmes, have an obligation not to print Iraqi propaganda uncritically, when members of the British armed forces—men and women—are endangering their lives on our behalf in the Gulf. The effect of such propaganda on their families must be very damaging, and I feel that, in such circumstances, the media have a responsibility not to print and use it in such an apparently uncritical way.

The great benefit of the speech of the right hon. Member for Chesterfield was that it provoked the response of my right hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater. He gave what I consider to be the most spirited defence of the Government's position. He said, trenchantly and passionately, that Iraq was a menace to the peace and stability of the region, and that it was run by a vicious and evil dictator who was developing weapons of mass destruction and the means to deliver them. This was unfinished business from the Gulf war, and a threat that must now be removed.

We wholly support the Government's position. The credibility of the willingness of the United States and the United Kingdom to act was at stake. Sufficient final warnings had been given after the events of November, when Saddam Hussein backed down at the last minute. I am sure that other dictators around the world—including Mr. Milosevic—are watching events closely.

Mr. Benn: The Conservative party had an alternative in dealing with Saddam. It armed him. When the right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King) was Secretary of State for Defence, Iraqi pilots were being trained by the Royal Air Force until a few days before the invasion of Kuwait. The truth is that the Conservatives' support for Saddam throughout the Iran-Iraq war completely destroys the moral basis of their argument.

As for the law and morality, I thought that law and morality were supposed to go together, and that an illegal action could not be moral. That is an argument that the hon. Gentleman should address.

Mr. Maples: The right hon. Gentleman seemed to me to be saying that something that he thought was immoral could have been made moral by a resolution of the United Nations Security Council. I do not see how that circle could have been squared. I must also point out that it was my party, in government, that fought the Gulf war—with, I have to say, the support of the right hon. Gentleman's party—and that, in view of that, it is inappropriate to criticise us as the right hon. Gentleman did.

Let me ask the Secretary of State some specific questions, which I hope he will have time to answer. I understand that there are 12 Tornado GR1s in Kuwait, and six more in Saudi Arabia. If the bombing campaign is likely to go on for more than a few days, will that be enough, and will the ordnance and support there be enough? I also understand that our forces are under the operational command and control of the United States. What is the role of permanent joint headquarters in the command line, and are the arrangements similar to previous arrangements that we have had with the United States when we have been the "junior partner" in a military operation?

I do not know whether the Secretary of State can tell us what damage was done to Iraqi air defences last night, and how easily he thinks that the losses might be replaced. Obviously, however, damaging or destroying air defences is a key part of the initial phases of the campaign, and of the safety of the pilots and crews of our aircraft, who will rely on their having been destroyed. We all wish them luck, and want them to know that our prayers are with

them—and that we sympathise with their families, who, at a time when the rest of us are planning to take a few days off, will know that their loved ones are on active service, and endangering their lives.

I recognise the military objective that the Government have set. It is a limited objective: to degrade weapons of mass-destruction capability, and to destroy enough military assets to weaken Saddam Hussein's grip on power. Can the Secretary of State tell us the extent of the planned destruction? Can he give us some idea of how long the campaign might last and, particularly, can he give us some idea about how the Government will judge whether they have been successful in achieving the objectives, and at what stage they will think that it is appropriate to terminate the bombing campaign?

There has been a considerable amount of discussion and some lack of clarity over whether it is felt that Saddam Hussein's removal is an essential precondition for re-establishing peace and stability in the region. Can the Secretary of State tell us whether that is an objective of the United States-United Kingdom policy? We think that it should be a policy objective, but we agree that it should not be an objective of the military campaign. I do not see how it could be achieved deliberately by the military campaign. Does the Secretary of State think that, in the long run, it will be possible to resolve the issue without getting rid of Saddam?

My hon. Friend the Member for Romsey raised the problem of the start of Ramadan. Does the Secretary of State think that that will be a problem with our Arab allies in this enterprise, many of whom are, at present, not saying very much, but are doing so in a fairly constructive way? I am sure that we would not want to do anything that might damage that support.

The main issue, which has been largely unposed and unanswered in the debate—I am not asking the Secretary of State to answer tonight, but I hope that the Government are thinking about it—is what we see as the end objective for Iraq. There is a danger of creating a power vacuum in a strategically important part of the world. We need a substantive and friendly Government in Iraq. I am sure that that is an objective that the Government share, but we have not articulated—we have not tried and neither have the Government—exactly what that objective is and how the Government propose to reach it. We seem to have a limited interim military objective of destroying the military capability and weapons of mass destruction, but no longer-term view on where we want to get to.

Civilian casualties are an inevitable consequence of campaigns such as this and they are what make many of us draw back from getting involved. The Foreign Secretary and the Prime Minister both articulated that sentiment for themselves. At the end of the day, the only justification for war is that the ends justify the means. In these circumstances and with modern weapons and intelligence, I hope that those civilian casualties can be limited to the absolute minimum. With any luck, there will be very few. It is inevitable that there will be some and, as I have said before, I hope that we shall not be taken in and influenced by Iraqi propaganda, and that the media will not fall for that.

Can the Secretary of State tell us what support the Government have had from France? France and Russia signed up to the United Nations resolutions. It is disappointing that they do not seem to be prepared to support whole-heartedly the action that is necessary to enforce those resolutions. It shows how important the United Kingdom-United States axis is in all these defence matters, and it shows how the interests of ourselves and France can differ in both our agendas and the national interests that we perceive.

Can the right hon. Gentleman tell us what has been the reaction of the Arab League and what diplomatic activity is going on in the Gulf? Can he tell us what support he expects or has from the Arab world? Are there any plans to raise this matter in front of the Security Council in the next few days? Does Austria have any plans to call together the General Affairs Council of the European Union? What efforts are taking place to secure the whole-hearted support of the European Union under the common foreign and security policy? All those countries have issues at stake in this region, just as we do.

Will the Secretary of State say a word about possible Iraqi retaliation either in the Gulf, perhaps in Israel or even through some form of terrorist attack against United Kingdom or United States people, or even on our respective territories? That opens a wider issue which, at some time, we would like to pursue, and that is the general problem of asymmetric threats and of rogue states with weapons of mass destruction and their ability to do damage to us. In paragraph 47, the strategic defence review promised a review of the issue over the summer and the production of a coherent national response to those threats. Is that ready, and when can we expect to receive it? The United States has a rather different policy and a far greater commitment to this through its Defence Threat Reduction Agency, with responders being trained in 120 United States cities and 10 special National Guard units. We will want to revisit that issue in the future.

We in the Conservative party fully support the Government's action. This evil business must be finished if possible, for the peace and stability of the region to be restored. We fear that it will not be possible fully to realise that until Saddam Hussein is removed from power in Iraq. The Government will face difficult problems in handling this crisis. They can count on our support for their objectives and having taken military action. We shall watch closely how they implement their policy and deal with those difficult issues as they arise.

9.40 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr. George Robertson): We have had a good, appropriate debate about the joint decision by the United Kingdom and the United States of America to take military action to reduce the threat from Saddam Hussein's nuclear, biological and chemical weapons capability and ambition. We have had speeches of passion and conviction, and of substance and gravity, but all of some considerable and appropriate sobriety, too.

It is invidious often at the beginning of winding-up speeches to single out hon. Members who have spoken, and I should like to deal with some of the points raised. Nevertheless, my hon. Friends the Members for Walsall, South (Mr. George) and for Swansea, East (Mr. Anderson), the Chairmen of the Select Committees on Defence and on Foreign Affairs respectively, made valuable contributions. We heard moving and outstanding speeches from my hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who has had a long, consistent

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interest in this subject, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Lothian (Mr. Home Robertson), who spoke with passion and experience. We heard speeches from my hon. Friends the Members for Walsall, North (Mr. Winnick) and for Stockton, North (Mr. Cook). The hon. Member for Tatton (Mr. Bell) made an interesting contribution before he departed to the outer limits of the House. My hon. Friend the Member for Workington (Mr. Campbell-Savours), who has been involved in the campaign against Saddam Hussein for far longer than many others, contributed well.

The hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin), the former chairman of the Select Committee on Defence, made a valuable contribution, not of all of which I agreed with, but some of his points were pertinent. The right hon. Member for Bridgwater (Mr. King), who held my position when Saddam Hussein last threatened not only his neighbours but international stability, made several perceptive points which have been useful to me in my detailed consideration of these affairs. I shall deal with some of the points as I go through my speech, although it is physically and verbally impossible to deal with the plethora of questions from hon. Members.

My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary clearly explained why we decided that we had to take military action this week. No one should imagine that that decision was taken lightly or without deep and careful thought. As the Prime Minister said, there can be no greater responsibility for any politician than to ask British service men and women to go out and risk their lives for their country and for international law and order.

I have listened, as we all have, carefully to the views of those opposed to the use of force. Perhaps some of us have sympathy for some of the feelings expressed. Military action inevitably has direct human consequences. Nobody involved in authorising or taking military action should ever close his or her eyes to that fact. Those who oppose the use of force must ask what alternative there could have been in the present circumstances.

Mr. Canavan: Earlier this year, I asked the Foreign Secretary specifically, whether he could rule out the possibility of a nuclear attack on Iraq. He replied:

"Yes, I can rule that out straight away."—[*Official Report*, 10 February 1998; Vol. 306, c. 154.]

More recently, he said that nothing could be ruled out. Which of his statements does the Defence Secretary agree with?

Mr. Robertson: The hon. Gentleman is perfectly well aware of what the position of Governments in this country has consistently been on that subject. If there is any question of this country's existence being under threat, the position is quite clear. Those who oppose the use of force—

Mr. Canavan: It is not clear at all—the statements are contradictory.

Mr. Robertson: Those who, in the debate today, have opposed the use of force have to answer the simple question of what the alternative would be. I contend that there was no alternative to what we have done. Quite simply, Saddam has almost certainly retained some stocks of chemical and biological weapons and has the capability to regenerate more. It is clear from the concealment, lying and deception that we have witnessed over the years that his prime objective is to keep that capability, and that cannot be allowed. The only reason that he would go to such lengths to retain his weapons of mass destruction capability is if he is prepared to use them. As long as he retains that capability, Saddam will remain the most serious threat to the stability of the whole of the middle east and to the security of his neighbours—neighbours who have been under threat for a long time.

It may sound far-fetched to some people to suggest that Saddam would actually use chemical and biological weapons, and to those who are normal that is indeed true. However, he has already done so. He used chemical agents extensively against Iran and even against his own people at Halabja in March 1988, when he killed thousands of Iraqi Kurds with mustard gas and the nerve agent tabun. I have met the refugees from Halabja and spoken to some of those who survived. They talked of what they called the bombs with no voices. The effects of that attack were indescribably horrible, and left physical and psychological scars on the survivors which will never heal. However, that was using only chemical weapons; the potential devastation that he could wreak with biological weapons—the biological weapons that have been uncovered by the UNSCOM inspectors—is many times more serious.

Mr. Cohen: I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. Will he clear up one point that was raised during the debate? He has referred to chemical weapons. During the Foreign Secretary's speech, it was pointed out that we would not be targeting chemical weapons in the bomb and missile attacks, yet the Prime Minister and other Ministers have talked of degrading them. Will the Secretary of State for Defence square that apparent contradiction?

Mr. Robertson: There is absolutely no contradiction. We are targeting the machinery through which the chemical weapons could be used. I am not prepared to go into detailed operational issues for understandable reasons, but I can assure the House that all relevant factors were taken into account in selecting the targets for the operations and only precision-guided weaponry is being used.

We are united in agreeing that Saddam's weapons of mass destruction and his capability in that respect must be dismantled. That is a sentiment that unites the international community and all members of the UN Security Council. We would all prefer that to have been achieved peacefully and diplomatically. Some believed that that was still possible. The Government and, I believe, the majority of those in the House did not. Saddam has had seven years in which to comply with his obligation to the UN to give up his weapons of mass destruction. He has been given chance after chance after chance to co-operate and on every occasion he has lied, cheated and obstructed. The time for diplomacy has passed.

The Prime Minister and the President of the United States gave the clearest possible warning on 16 November that if there were any further obstruction we would strike without warning. True to form, Saddam Hussein not only

obstructed UNSCOM yet again, but made its whole job impossible. The conclusion of Ambassador Butler's report is inescapable to anyone who has concerns about the subject.

The campaign is limited but intensive; we have chosen targets that are connected to Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction capability, with other capabilities which pose a threat to his neighbours, such as command and control capabilities, and with air defence systems which could pose a threat to coalition aircraft involved in the operation. That operation is on-going, and United Kingdom aircraft are in the air as we speak. It will continue for as long as is necessary.

Saddam Hussein's record of non-compliance is considerable. His non-compliance with resolution 687 is not confined to his disavowal of the regime of the UNSCOM inspectors. He has not complied with practically every point that he accepted as part of the ceasefire settlement. I shall outline just one. At the time of the ceasefire, Saddam Hussein was called upon, and agreed to, repatriate the Kuwaiti prisoners of war. They have never been repatriated, and that is a disgrace and a continuing stain on Saddam Hussein. We will not forget those who were captured and remain in detention.

The Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary explained fully and clearly how Saddam has failed to comply on the weapons of mass destruction front. The fact is that that non-compliance has continued on and off throughout the period since the end of the war. Saddam Hussein attacked the Iraqi Kurds in April 1991 and we introduced the northern no-fly zone. He threatened Kuwait again in 1994. In 1992, he attacked the Shia in the marshlands of southern Iraq and we were obliged to establish no-fly zones in southern Iraq as well. In 1996, Saddam Hussein again attacked his own countrymen and women in the Kurdish north of Iraq. Throughout those years, he obstructed and deceived the UNSCOM inspectors. He said at first that he had no chemical or biological weapons. As those weapons were disclosed and discovered, he continued to lie about the weapons that he retained and failed to disclose.

Several hon. Members—including the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples)—asked an important question during the debate. As the military action continues, I think that it deserves an answer in my winding-up speech. That question is: what is the long-term strategy after this military operation has ended? First, Saddam Hussein's obligations to disarm will remain and, come what may, he must one day comply fully with the resolutions agreed at the end of the Gulf war. Secondly, as a result of this military action, his capability to build and use chemical and biological weapons, and therefore his ability to threaten his neighbours, will be severely damaged and diminished.

Thirdly, the sanctions regime will remain in place and enforcement will be tightened so that the funding of the soft life of the Iraqi elite and the military superstructure of Iraq will become increasingly difficult. Saddam Hussein will eventually have to take back the UNSCOM inspectors if he wants the sanctions to end. Fourthly, until Saddam Hussein complies fully with the United Nations Security Council resolutions, we will not withdraw the threat of renewed military action without warning. If he tries once again to regain his capability to develop weapons of mass destruction and his ambition to intimidate and threaten his neighbours, he will have to face the consequences. We will not go away.

Hon. Members have asked about the command and control of British troops in the Gulf operation. Royal Air Force aircraft engaged in operations over Iraq are under the tactical control of the US joint force commander, but political control is retained at all times by this Government.

The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon, the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin) and others asked what our deadline is for military action. I am not willing, and no Member would expect me, to answer that question in detail. Military action will cease when we judge that we have achieved our objectives. We are, of course, sensitive to the start of the Muslim holy month, as hon. Members would expect us to be.

Mr. Corbyn: Will the Minister give way?

Mr. Robertson: No, I have very little time and I should like to do justice to hon. Members' questions and arguments.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) cast doubt on the legality of the operation, but they could not have been listening to my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary. If stating the case a third time will enable them to comprehend, let me say that in February—few of us will ever forget it—following Kofi Annan's initiative and visit to Baghdad, the UN Security Council resolved that any violation of the provisions of its resolution 687, relating to the immediate, unconditional and unconstrained access of UN special inspectors to the sites that they believed held the weapons of mass destruction, would lead to the severest consequences for Iraq. That warning was enshrined in a Security Council resolution.

I say to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chesterfield, my hon. Friend the Member for Linlithgow and anyone else who needs reassurance on that important point that Ambassador Butler's report yesterday to the United Nations could hardly have been clearer in outlining the systematic failure of the Iraqi regime to honour those conditions. There is no doubt about that fact.

The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon and the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. and learned Member for Folkestone and Hythe (Mr. Howard), asked about Arab support for our action in the Gulf. I remind them that, when the Damascus declaration states—Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Oman—met on 12 November, they stated that Saddam alone would be to blame for any repercussions following his decision to cease co-operation with UNSCOM. They were clear and unambiguous on that point. The Gulf Co-operation Council has more recently reiterated the need for Saddam to comply with UN Security Council resolutions.

I know that the House is conscious of how grave is the situation in the Gulf this week. Of course, there is a price to be paid for taking military action against any brutal dictator, especially one with no principles, no scruples and no sense of humanity. There are risks to human beings, whether they are the pilots of our planes or civilians and others in Iraq, many of whom will be deliberately placed

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in danger by that regime. I know, more than most, how important are those considerations in making plans for any military action. I would regret bitterly any loss of life or limb.

We wanted a peaceful outcome, but Saddam Hussein did not. The price of doing nothing would be far, far greater. The price of letting Saddam Hussein develop—

Mr. Benn *rose in his place and claimed to move,* That the Question be now put.

Question, That the Question be now put, *put and agreed to.*

Question put:—

The House proceeded to a Division—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: There is no Member willing to act as Teller for the Ayes, so the motion now lapses, and we move on.

Mr. Canavan: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Does this not mean that the House has voted unanimously against the military operation in the Gulf?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair. We must now move on to the next business.

Mr. Benn: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. The House has voted not to adjourn, so the debate continues.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The House has not voted. It is now past 10 pm; the motion lapses, and we must move on.

Mr. Galloway: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am not taking any more points of order on this issue.

Mr. Galloway: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am not taking any more points of order on that issue.

Mr. Galloway: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it the same point of order?

Mr. Galloway: No.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it further to the previous point of order?

Mr. Galloway: Yes.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have dealt with that, and we must now move on.

Mr. Galloway: So the House is being cheated—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have dealt with that point of order, and we must now move on.

Mr. Galloway: The House has been cheated of its opportunity to vote—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I have dealt with that point of order. We shall now move on to the next business.

Mr. Galloway: The House has been cheated of an opportunity. The minority of hon. Members who are against the war—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. When I am on my feet, hon. Members will sit down. The hon. Gentleman has had more than his say this afternoon.

Mr. Galloway: I beg your pardon—I have not even been called this afternoon.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman has made his point.

Mr. Galloway: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I insist on my right as a Member of Parliament to raise a point of order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it the same point of order?

Mr. Galloway: It is not.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: In that case, I will listen to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr. Galloway: The country is at war and, as a result of a procedural trick, the minority opposition to that war is being cheated of the opportunity to record its vote. What kind of Government—what kind of war effort—require parliamentary democracy to be abused and mocked in such a circumstance?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have heard the hon. Gentleman's point of order, but we must, I am afraid, now move on.

Mr. Campbell-Savours: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Will you confirm that there is no motion on the Order Paper on the military action? The only motion on the Order Paper is for the Adjournment of the House. The hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin (Mr. Galloway) has simply misread the procedures of the House of Commons. He does not understand.

Mr. Galloway: You cannot face 20 people opposing you—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. That is enough. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Member for Glasgow, Kelvin is an experienced Member of the House. We all know and understand just how important this debate is and just how much emotion it has aroused. The House has listened to his point of order and fully understands both his concerns and his point of view, but we must move on to preserve the rest of the business. I trust that he will accept that.

Mr. Benn: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Dalyell: Further to that point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I think that we have dealt more than adequately with the point of order.

Mr. Benn *rose—*

Mr. Dalyell *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot prolong the debate, which, in a sense, is what the right hon. Member for Chesterfield (Mr. Benn) and the hon. Member for Linlithgow (Mr. Dalyell) are seeking to do.

Mr. Dalyell: On a separate point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. Is it not within your power to ask Madam

Speaker to resume the Chair? Frankly, this issue—I speak with 36 years' experience in the House—bluntly brings the House of Commons and its procedures into disrepute. Minorities have a right to register their view. On one previous occasion, Speaker Selwyn-Lloyd came to the Chair in roughly similar circumstances. Could we ask, through you, that Madam Speaker be apprised of the situation?

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I hear what the hon. Gentleman says.

Mr. Canavan: *rose—*

Mr. Benn *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am afraid that we have followed the procedures of the House. At this point, there is nothing more that I can do to help. We must move to the next item of business.

Mr. Canavan: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Benn: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am not taking any more points of order.

Mr. Benn *rose—*

Mr. Canavan *rose—*

Mr. John Austin (Erith and Thamesmead): I spy Strangers.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We have dealt with matters as the House should. Hon. Members may not be content personally with the way in which things have gone, but we have followed the procedures of the House. The hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mr. McWalter) is here to present a petition to the House. It is only right that we should move on to such business.

Mr. Benn: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Canavan: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Cohen: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am not taking any more points of order.

Mr. Benn *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman must not be on his feet when I am on my feet. He has heard today's debate; the subject has been thoroughly aired. I understand his concern about the way in which the proceedings have ended, but we cannot correct them tonight. I am not prepared to dwell on this matter any longer. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to make any complaint about the way in which things have gone, he may do so through the usual channels.

Mr. Benn *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am on my feet. We shall now take the petition.

Mr. Cohen: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Canavan: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Benn: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. You have no idea, Mr. Deputy Speaker, what I wish to put to you.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Is it an entirely separate point of order?

Mr. Benn: It is entirely separate. I make no complaint about the procedural correctness of what happened. I want to put it on record that the Government called a special debate but the House of Commons was denied the opportunity to register its opinion, yet British service men and women are at risk. I put that on the record as a matter of fact—

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. As I thought, the right hon. Gentleman is seeking only to prolong the debate and put further things on record. I am sure that other hon. Members who are rising in their places also want to put other things on the record. I shall now call Mr. Tony McWalter.

Mr. Galloway: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Cohen: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Canavan: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am not taking any more points of order.

Mr. Galloway: On a separate point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker. It is an entirely separate point of order.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I am sure that all the points—

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am on my feet.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No; I am on my feet. When I am on my feet other hon. Members will sit down. I cannot believe, with all honesty, that the points of order that hon. Gentlemen are seeking to raise are not related to the matters on which we have now spent several hours. I addressed the hon. Member for Kelvin at great length a few moments ago, and I thought that he understood the

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position. Many of the other hon. Members who are seeking to rise are experienced Members of the House. I have already said that I understand the feelings that are aroused by a debate like this, but we have done things correctly as the House should do them, and there is nothing more that we can do to correct things tonight. If hon. Members want to raise—

Mr. Cohen: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Canavan: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: No. I am not prepared to take the points of order. Hon. Members really ought to be fair to the hon. Member who is waiting to present his petition. Mr. Tony McWalter.

Mr. Cohen: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Canavan: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Galloway: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. I am now prepared to take points of order only if they are on entirely separate matters.

Mr. Cohen: On a point of order on an entirely different matter, Mr. Deputy Speaker. I heard my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Mr. Austin) say, "I spy Strangers." I am not sure whether you heard that, and whether we could take a vote on that matter.

Mr. Galloway: I spy Strangers, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: I have to tell the House that there is no such motion that we can put before it. Tony McWalter.

Mr. Canavan: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Galloway: On a point of order, Mr. Deputy Speaker.

Mr. Deputy Speaker: Order. We now come to the petition.

PETITION

Hemel Hempstead General Hospital

10.12 pm

Mr. Tony McWalter (Hemel Hempstead): I wish to present a petition. It states:

The Humble Petition of 35,610 persons likely to be affected detrimentally by the plans of the West Hertfordshire Health Authority, which plans were submitted recently to the Secretary of State for Health for his decision,

Sheweth That

The aforesaid plans imply potentially closure of or downgrading of the Hemel Hempstead General Hospital, notwithstanding that the said hospital has had within the year 1998 a new Accident and Emergency facility built at a cost of over £5 million,

and that

The acute services available at the aforesaid Hemel Hempstead General Hospital are held in the highest regard by the community of West Hertfordshire,

Wherefore your Petitioners pray your Honourable House urge that the aforesaid plans of the West Hertfordshire Health Authority be not countenanced by the Secretary of State for Health

And your Petitioners, as in duty bound, will ever pray etc.

To lie upon the Table.

Tourism, Leisure and Sport

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*[Mrs. McGuire.]*

10.13 pm

Mr. Tom Pendry (Stalybridge and Hyde): It says here, "What a great pleasure it is to be called at this time." *[Laughter.]* It is especially fitting to have secured the Adjournment debate on the subject of tourism, sport and leisure just before the House—and the country—turns its attention to the Christmas period, when there will be much enjoyment of, and participation in, all such activities.

I want to address not just the pleasure that those activities bring to millions of people in this country, but the crucial economic contribution that they make to our economy. In the past generation, sport, tourism and leisure have grown to become one of the largest and most important contributors to today's modern economy. Sport and leisure now employ some 750,000 people, and every year more than £10 billion is spent on sport consumer products.

The Treasury receives £3.5 billion in tax revenues from the sports industry. On an even larger scale, tourism now contributes more than £53 billion to the economy and provides 1.7 million jobs. In 1997, 26.2 million visitors came to Britain. It is estimated that, in the next 10 years, 400,000 new jobs will be created in that sector, given the right conditions for growth and support from the Government. It is that support that I and some 220,000 small and medium-sized firms seek. I am still concerned that sport, leisure and tourism, which have many interlocking synergies, are not given sufficient recognition by the Government as true economic powerhouses and in terms of their potential for growth.

Earlier this week, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport announced major reforms of the Government's funding of cultural activities. It was disappointing to note that there was little increase in funding for sport and tourism. In economic terms, tourism is by far the biggest and most important component of the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In some cases, it provides the wealth that subsidises other components of the Department such as the arts and museums.

The British Tourist Authority achieves a return for the UK economy of £27 for every £1 of public money spent on marketing abroad. The fact that it is to reallocate £5 million to spend on marketing in key markets is welcome, but I think that the Secretary of State could have granted a larger increase in its budget, especially when one realises that such expenditure leads to an increase in Exchequer revenue, as visitors from overseas pay various direct and indirect taxes.

We await with interest the more detailed proposals for the restructured English tourist board. We are told that it will be more strategically focused. We must ensure that it plays a positive role in promoting the attractions of leisure and tourism that England offers in the United Kingdom marketplace. I welcome the renewed commitment to the industry shown by the Secretary of State through the expanded tourism forum, which was set up when we were in opposition, and which he chairs. I welcome the enthusiasm that the Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting has brought to her job. I am pleased that she is replying to the debate. I know that since her appointment she has consulted widely on a new tourism strategy, which is set to be published early in the new year. As chairman of the all-party tourism group, I await that development with great interest.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will not ignore the thinking that the party has already undertaken on the subject. In opposition, we undertook extensive consultation with many sectors of tourism and the hospitality industry. Much of that work was done in partnership with the industry forum, and we subsequently received much praise from the industry's leaders when we published our policy document "Breaking New Ground—Labour's strategy for tourism and hospitality". That comprehensive policy document, which set out a strategy for the tourism industries, was published before the election by me and my right hon. Friend the Member for Copeland (Dr. Cunningham), who, as shadow Secretary of State for National Heritage, had responsibility for tourism.

Our document contained a range of policies and initiatives to improve our tourism infrastructure and economy. They involved updating tourism structures, enhancing standards, co-ordinating overseas marketing and investing in people. The centrepiece of our tourism policy, and a commitment that I hope will be reiterated in the forthcoming tourism strategy, was the proposal to introduce a new development of tourism Bill. It is now 25 years since a previous Labour Government introduced the Development of Tourism Act 1969, the first and only such legislation, which gave a coherent focus to tourism, marketing and promotion. Clearly, in that time circumstances have changed and new challenges have arisen.

As tourism grows to be the world's biggest industry and becomes such a mainstay of our economy, it is vital that we review and update the structures of government support. I was therefore encouraged to note that, in the "New Cultural Framework" document, reference was made to the Department's hope of finding an opportunity to amend legislation to ensure that England, Scotland, Wales and London were formally represented on the board of the British Tourist Authority.

An issue of concern to a significant sector of the tourism industry in London is the development of tourism on the Thames. Such tourism has grown immeasurably in recent years, with new markets and considerable investment, following the Port of London Authority's "partners in progress" programme. The Thames now attracts 2 million visitors a year, generating a revenue of between £20 million and £30 million a year, yet London still lags behind cities such as Paris in its exploitation of the river as a tourist attraction.

In April 1999, as the House knows, responsibility for all river functions will pass to London River Services, a newly formed subsidiary of London Transport. There is a concern that the new body will focus on transport to the detriment of tourism, jeopardising the considerable investment that operators have in our river.

I know that it is the intention of the Department to be represented in every regional office, and to play a much greater role in interdepartmental liaison. Can my hon. Friend assure me that she will look into the matter and make inquiries of the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions and the Government office for London, to ensure that tourism is fully integrated in the management of the river under London Transport?

[Mr. Tom Pendry]

In economic terms, tourism is one of Britain's largest export industries. I wish to raise some of the concerns in the industry about the high taxes that we place on the product. Our VAT rate on hotel accommodation is the second highest in Europe. Other countries have taken advantage of our uncompetitive decision by reducing their VAT rates on hotel accommodation and attracting more visitors. I know that a report on the matter prepared by the BTA is before Ministers, and I urge them to consider it carefully.

In a move that was even more damaging for tourism, the previous Government introduced and then doubled the rates of air passenger duty. It is the only unit tax that I know on an export product. Every visitor to Britain from Europe must pay £10 when catching a flight to the UK and £20 if travelling from outside the European Union. If visitors decide, as many do, to fly to Scotland, for example, or one of our regions, they must pay even more tax. That is damaging tourism growth, especially in Scotland and the regions—areas that often depend most on tourism.

Recent figures released by the British Incoming Tour Operators Association reveal a 4 per cent. fall in visitor numbers during 1998, at a time when cool Britannia should be giving us a marketing edge on our competitors. Clearly, by doubling APD, the previous Government played a contributory part in the fall in numbers. APD damages our balance of payments and stymies further employment opportunities. I urge my hon. Friend and her colleagues in the Department to raise the issue with the Chancellor so that he does not repeat the Conservatives' folly by further increasing rates of APD.

Before dealing with our most played and spectated sport, football, I shall touch on sport in general, which is a great earner for the British economy. Horse racing is often overlooked when sport is debated in the House. British racing is not only a leading spectator sport, but a major industry contributing massive amounts of revenue to our economy.

More than 100,000 people are employed in the racing and betting industries, including one in eight agricultural workers. Racing and breeding generate exports worth more than £90 million a year and income exceeding £600 million a year. About £450 million a year is raised in tax and betting duty through betting on horse racing. There are more than 5 million racecourse attendances a year. Those figures indicate the scale of the sport and its importance to our economy. A study by KPMG in 1996 estimated that one in 15 racegoers is a tourist and therefore an overnight stayer. In 1996 about 330,000 tourists visited racecourses, of whom half were likely to be from overseas.

The British Horseracing Board this year launched a financial plan that aims to secure the future of British racing on the international stage, as well as creating more jobs, raising more revenue and improving education and training opportunities in that industry. I hope that the Government will carefully examine the board's proposals and acknowledge the importance of the sport to our economy and culture.

Next year's sporting calendar shows that in 1999 Britain will host a number of major sporting events, including world cup rugby and cricket tournaments, world judo and orienteering championships, as well as the much cherished annual events such as Wimbledon, open golf, Ascot and the Derby.

It has been suggested by the national association for the governing bodies of sport that the Government adopt a tax exemption for sporting events parallel to that afforded to the UK film industry. The idea is to introduce a tax exemption that would assist governing bodies which host international bodies and sporting events, which, through tourism and related services, would bring considerable economic benefits to Britain. I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will pass that message on to the Chancellor. She will be busy talking to him.

Not only do we see the huge economic potential of sport, but it has considerable importance in promoting a healthier nation. A report published only this week reveals that 23 per cent. of young men and 19 per cent. of young women are overweight. Therefore, the promotion of sport not only benefits the Exchequer but leads to reduced demands on the NHS. The spending review, however, contains only a meagre increase in grant-in-aid for sport of £3 million in the period 1998 to 2001. Compared with grants to the arts and museums, that is insignificant. The sports world fears that it is being penalised for being efficient with its money and successful in its commercial activities.

I must declare my interest as chairman of the Football Trust. It is true that the game is riding high at the moment—despite the unwelcome developments of the past few days at the Football Association, to which I will return later—compared with the 1980s, when, as chairman of the all-party football group, I and fellow members of the group worried for the very future of the game. Yet there is still a threat, and that is the persistent menace of the football hooligan. That is why I so warmly welcome the Government's statement last week on further legislation to clamp down on football hooligans, especially those who tarnish our name abroad.

I must gently chide some Ministers for not recognising, when announcing so-called new policies, that many of the proposals have been Labour party policy for some time and were endorsed by the electorate. The failure to attribute the consultation and work that went into their development is, to say the least, disingenuous. Many of the proposals launched by the Home Office were contained in the charter for football launched before the election. Had the previous Government heeded our calls for such measures, we might not have had to witness some of the world cup scenes with so few powers at our disposal to deal with them.

It is vital that such measures reach the statute book quickly. The United Kingdom is in a leading position to host the world cup in 2006, which would bring enormous benefits to the UK economy. Euro 96 brought a significant increase in the number of visitors to the country, bringing vital foreign exchange earnings with them.

I hope that the Government's new sports strategy, also due this Session, will refer to the potential of sport to promote tourism and economic growth through Britain hosting major international sporting events.

If we are still to make a credible bid for the world cup in 2006, which I am sure that we will and can as we have an excellent case, backed by superb stadiums, and a proven track record, our ability to manage and control our

small yet persistent minority of soccer hooligans is vital. I am concerned that the Government see fit to leave such matters to the parliamentary tightrope of a private Member's Bill rather than bring them forward as a Government measure. We cannot underestimate the deadlines that we are up against. Euro 2000, to take place in Belgium and Holland, is just 18 months away. We must have legislation on the statute book to ensure that we do not see a repeat of some of the scenes in France.

The economic potential of hosting major international sporting events for the UK is huge. The successful Euro 96 football competition brought the Exchequer approximately £60 million from taxes on products such as tickets, accommodation, food and drink, and from corporation tax. That is why the new sports cabinet must address urgently issues such as the future of Wembley stadium, and the establishment and day-to-day running of the Sports Institute and its regional academies—a policy promoted not by the former Prime Minister but by the late and greatly missed Denis Howell in opposition following extensive consultation with the sporting world.

Those are the fundamentals that must be in place if we are successfully to bid for and win the right to host major events. I, for one, applaud the efforts of my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport in travelling the world, seeking support for England's bid to host the world cup in 2006. It is the day-to-day involvement of a member of the Government that will make a difference to the perception of our bid by the representatives of other countries.

There is currently consultation on the Government's sports policy. Again I urge the Minister to reflect carefully on "Labour's Sporting Nation", the sports policy document that I launched during the election campaign. It set out the framework for a national strategy for sport covering such issues as school and youth sport, broadcasting, tackling drug abuse, local authority sport, reform of the lottery and the restructuring of sport. In that restructure it was our clear intention to make the Sports Council the lead strategic body for sport. That has still to occur to any meaningful extent, so I hope that it will feature in the sports strategy.

Finally, I turn to Tuesday's events, which rocked the football world. I do not know the details of the events which led to the vote of no confidence in Mr. Wiseman, the chairman of the Football Association and the resignation of Graham Kelly, the chief executive, but it has been clear for many years that the FA needs restructuring. Personally, I am saddened by Mr. Kelly's departure. He is a man of great integrity and his love of football is obvious to all who know him. I am sure that the House joins me in wishing him well in future.

David Davies, the acting chief executive, recognises the need for changes in the structure of the FA and I hope that he will be given every opportunity to kick start the process of change. I am sure that the House wishes him well in that task.

Our document "A New Framework for Football—Labour's Charter for Football" was endorsed by the National Executive Committee and the shadow Cabinet as well as the FA, the Premier League, the Professional Footballers Association and the supporters' organisations and others. It had a foreword by the then Leader of the Opposition, now my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. It stated:

"Restructuring is underway at the Football Association, reflecting a long-established need for change. We welcome this recognition of the changing pressures and situations within the game. Labour's view is that further modifications to the Football Association's Executive Committee would bring about quicker decision-making and ensure a better say for the professional game. Labour would not wish to see football divided, and there has never been a greater need for coherence and consistency. Football deserves nothing less than a Football Association, fit for the 21st century, to oversee the game."

That was our policy at the general election and I trust that it is now. I hope, therefore, that Ministers will adhere to the words of the Prime Minister in the foreword:

"It is up to the Government working in partnership with the football authorities and other interested organisations to ensure that the right framework for football is created."

Only when the appropriate structures are in place will we see a Football Association leading soccer at every level to where it deserves to be led.

It was always my hope in 28 years in the House to see sport and latterly tourism elevated to their rightful places in the higher echelons of government. I hope that the present Government will fulfil that wish.

10.32 pm

The Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting (Janet Anderson): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Mr. Pendry) on securing tonight's Adjournment debate and thank him for his kind words. As he said, I am extremely enthusiastic about my new role as Minister for Tourism, Film and Broadcasting. He will know that one of the first things that I did was to change the order of my title to reflect the particular importance I attach to tourism. I also pay tribute to the work that my hon. Friend does as chair of the all-party tourism group. My hon. Friend spoke about the need for Government support for those sectors. I assure him that we are very much aware of that, and of the importance of those sectors to the economy.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport needs a champion for the industries who recognises their important contribution to the economy. We have such a champion in my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State.

My hon. Friend has raised many different issues. I hope that he will forgive me if I do not respond to them all, but I shall do my best. He spoke about VAT rates on hotel accommodation. As he said, the Treasury is considering a report on that. He also referred to air passenger duty and his fear that any increase in that duty would damage tourism. He knows that that fear is shared by others. It is a good example of the Department having to undertake what my right hon Friend the Prime Minister calls joined-up government. I assure him that the industry's concerns about that matter have been conveyed to the appropriate places.

My hon. Friend also spoke at length about sport and its contribution to the economy. He spoke about horse racing and the number of people who visited race courses. We shall look carefully at the board's proposals.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend again—he has so many hats that I could probably continue to do so for many hours—and thank him for the work that he has undertaken in his first 12 months as chairman of the Football Trust. Like him, I welcome the Government's intention to clamp down on football hooliganism. As he knows, the Minister for Sport, my hon. Friend the Member for West Ham (Mr. Banks), will propose a sports strategy. I repeat what my hon. Friend said and applaud the Minister for all that he is doing to try to bring the world cup here in 2006.

[Janet Anderson]

My hon. Friend was way ahead of us all: in opposition, he produced a document entitled "Breaking New Ground—Labour's strategy for tourism and hospitality". I assure him that the Department has used it as a guide in drawing up our strategy, which we shall publish in the new year. My hon. Friend was one of the first people to recognise both the importance of tourism and hospitality to the economy and the fact that it is the world's largest and fastest-growing industry. We now know that, in this country alone, tourism contributes some £53 billion a year to the economy and employs some 1.7 million people.

The Government want to deliver what my hon. Friend promised in opposition: to assist Britain in attaining an unassailable position as one of the world's most popular tourist destinations, and to establish tourism as a source of national pride by encouraging investment in our infrastructure, communities, attractions and people.

We have already gone some way towards meeting the objectives that my hon. Friend set out comprehensively in opposition. The first is the strategy, which is now almost ready. He referred to the outcome of the departmental spending review, particularly to the restructuring that we intend to carry out. That was decided after a wide consultation, to which we had more than 300 responses. I reassure my hon. Friend that its purpose was not to cut funding to tourism. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made it clear that it was about trying to assess whether there was a better and more effective way of spending our funding in support of the tourism industry.

Virtually all the responses called for a smaller, more streamlined national strategic body to oversee English tourism. As we announced on Monday, that is how we see the way ahead. That body will concentrate on only five key areas: innovation; research; quality standards; disseminating best practice; and overseeing information systems. Funding in support of English tourism will be maintained, but a greater proportion will go to the regions for the direct provisions of services. I represent a beautiful constituency in the north-west, so I welcome that.

We shall also work alongside other regional organisations and development agencies. It is a chance for the regional tourist boards to develop a more strategic role. We must look carefully at the exact relationship between the national body, the regional development agencies and local authorities, and develop it, because it is important.

My hon. Friend mentioned the British Tourist Authority. We were pleased to announce that the BTA will be provided with above-inflation increases next year and the year after. It is the first real increase in funding to tourism for many years. Under the previous Government, funding to the English tourist board dropped from £25 million to just under £10 million. It is only a small amount, but I hope that we are beginning to redress the balance. The BTA is also reallocating £5 million a year from within existing resources through restructuring, which will enable it to develop new marketing campaigns, provide a world-class information service in every office, further develop its award-winning internet sites and offer an improved service to the UK trade.

The tourism forum was a 57-member advisory body, which represented a wide range of organisations involved in tourism and related areas. The forum has played an invaluable role in helping us to develop our new strategy for tourism. Some 200 people, through a number of smaller working groups, considered a range of issues. I thank those people for the dedication that they gave to the task. They are all busy people who do busy jobs, and we were enormously grateful that they gave up their time.

Those groups examined human resources or people issues, a communications strategy for the industry, business tourism, cross-Whitehall issues affecting tourism, such as planning and transport, and widening access to tourism—about 40 per cent. of the population never take a holiday, and we intend to consider that matter carefully in conjunction with the social exclusion unit. One group examined visitor attractions, and another group on domestic tourism considered sustainability and quality, which are extremely important, and distribution.

A strategic planning group, chaired by the Secretary of State, has met monthly since December 1997. The industry has welcomed my right hon. Friend's commitment to the workings of the forum. Our plans for the future of the tourism forum will be set out in our new strategy to be published next year.

We are keen to offer strategic leadership to help the industry to increase its coherence and to remain globally competitive. That is why we have worked closely with the industry to formulate a comprehensive strategy. It is a determined attempt to provide joined-up government, with my Department promoting tourism's interests within government and maximising the industry's involvement in policy initiatives from across government. Key initiatives included in the strategy are aimed at promoting career opportunities in the industry, increasing access to tourism for those with low incomes, families, the elderly and the disabled, providing better information about tourism, and developing and promoting quality tourism experiences. The strategy will be about quality, value for money and service.

I am running out of time, but I should like quickly to deal with my hon. Friend's remarks about London and the river. I take on board what he said. Under the Greater London Authority Bill, the mayor will have specific duties related to tourism, and we shall carefully consider what develops from that, because it is important. We are approaching the millennium, and the millennium dome will be the biggest tourist experience for many years.

The motion having been made after Ten o'clock, and the debate having continued for half an hour, MR. DEPUTY SPEAKER *adjourned the House without Question put, till Monday 11 January, pursuant to Resolution [8 December].*

Adjourned at seventeen minutes to Eleven o'clock.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 7 December 1998

SOCIAL SECURITY

Benefits Agency

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what instructions are issued to Benefits Agency staff who deal with the public requiring them to identify themselves. [61626]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Benefits Agency is a matter for its Chief Executive, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Ms Claire Ward, dated 3 December 1998:

I am replying to your recent Parliamentary Question about the instructions issued to Benefits Agency staff who deal with the public requiring them to identify themselves.

Benefits Agency policy on the issue of staff giving their names to customers is as follows:

When dealing with the public inside the office, staff should:

give their name on the telephone and in letters

wear name badges.

Name badges should normally display either the member of staff's:

surname and forename or initials or

forename and job title (job title alone is not sufficient).

Staff should not give their name if they have reasons for believing that their safety is at risk.

If staff feel that their safety is at risk by providing their actual name, they have the right, following consultation with management, to use an office name. This should be sensible and should be consistently used by that member of staff on all office business.

BA does not expect staff to wear name badges outside the office. They should normally give their name if requested unless they feel that their personal safety is at risk. Staff who carry an ID card must show it on arrival and give their name if asked.

These instructions are contained in the BA Conditions of Service Manual and are referred to in the letter issued to staff taking up permanent appointment.

I hope you find this reply is helpful.

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the administrative cost would be of *(a)* paying an additional 40p per week on the state pension and *(b)* paying a £20 winter fuel bonus to all pensioners once per year. [62243]

Mr. Denham: The administration of the Benefits Agency is a matter for its Chief Executive, Peter Mathison. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 3 December 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what the administrative cost would be of a) paying an additional 40p per week on the State pension and b) paying a £20 winter fuel bonus to all pensioners once per year.

If the 40p increase were to be paid as part of the annual uprating exercise, there would be no additional administrative cost. If it were to be paid separately the additional costs are estimated at around £500,000.

The administrative costs of paying a £20 winter fuel bonus to all State Pension recipients resident in Great Britain once a year would be around £12 million.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Appeals

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people had appealed against an adjudicator's decision *(a)* successfully and *(b)* unsuccessfully, up to 31 October. [62858]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

All cases heard and decided by an Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) Appeal Tribunal

All centres	*Decided in appellant's favour*	*Decided against appellant*
January 1998	4,132	10,728
February 1998	4,337	11,845
March 1998	5,326	13,761
April 1997	4,470	10,020
May 1998	4,632	10,850
June 1998	5,267	12,788
July 1998	5,371	13,452
August 1998	4,771	12,103
September 1998	4,568	11,494
Total	42,874	107,041

Source:
Appeals—Data supplied by Analytical Services Division (ASD) from the ITS Generic Appeals Processing System

Single Gateway

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the single gateway process will *(a)* permit routes to independence other than work, and *(b)* include advice on full take up of benefits. [62625]

Angela Eagle: Claimants will be offered a package of help designed around their particular needs, and will be given access to a wide range of support and services. This will help them to focus both on the benefits of work and to plan a route back to independence.

The personal adviser will also ensure that the claimant is receiving the full range of benefits to which they are entitled, whilst providing personalised calculations of net income to help the claimant understand the extent to which they could be better off in work.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what steps his Department will take to ensure that claimants subject to the single gateway are offered early interviews to allow prompt payment of benefit; [62620]

(2) what target has been set for the time within which claimants should be offered single gateway interviews. [62621]

Angela Eagle: The Single Gateway process is being developed to allow for personal adviser interviews to take place, in most cases, within three working days of the first contact with the office. Processing of the benefit will run concurrently with the new Gateway processes in order to minimise delay.

There will, as now, be arrangements for meeting urgent benefit needs.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the functions will be of the call centres in the pilots in Somerset, Buckinghamshire, Gwent Borders and Calderdale and Kirklees in implementing the single gateway. [62626]

Angela Eagle: From November 1999 we are seeking to test call centre technology in the four named pilot areas as part of the single gateway pilot programme. This programme will bring together the Employment Service, Benefits Agency and other welfare providers in a single point of contact.

We aim to test how modern technology can make the service as quick and efficient as possible. We will use call centres to perform the Registration and Orientation stages of the new arrangements as described in Chapter 3 of "A New Contract for Welfare: The Gateway to Work". We are also looking at how better telephone technology might be used to improve the service we can offer clients in other areas of Gateway work.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what safeguards will be introduced to ensure that single gateway interviews are arranged at mutually convenient times, and that home visits are arranged where appropriate. [62673]

Angela Eagle: Single Gateway interviews will be arranged in discussion with the claimant and at a mutually convenient time. A home visit will be arranged where circumstances make it impractical for the claimant to attend the office.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the personal advisers within the single gateway will operate in conjunction with the New Deal personal advisers. [62624]

Angela Eagle: The precise working arrangements have yet to be determined. Our aim will be to offer new benefit claimants the best possible help and advice in planning a route back to independence. Our experience in the pilot areas will inform decisions about what works best.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the exemptions allowed in respect of the single gateway interview. [62623]

Angela Eagle: There will be no list of exemptions. We expect that an immediate interview will take place in the large majority of cases but this requirement may be waived or deferred where appropriate in the particular circumstances of the case.

Disability Benefits

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what information his Department has collected relating to the income tax bands of claimants of disability living allowance. [62633]

Mr. Timms: The information is not routinely collected.

Estimates of the current recipients of disability living allowance (DLA) based on the 1995–96 family resources survey

Tax band	*Number of DLA recipients*
20 per cent. rate	120,000
23 per cent. rate	110,000
40 per cent. rate	10,000

Notes:

1. The tax rates refer to the highest marginal rate of income tax the recipient is liable to pay.
2. Entitlement to Disability Living Allowance depends on the level of help a disabled person needs with personal care and mobility, not on their level of income.
3. These estimates are based on survey information and subject to margins of error.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much it would cost to extend up to 25 years of age the limit of 20 years of age before which disability must have occurred which is placed upon severe disablement allowance. [62340]

Mr. Timms: We estimate the cost to be broadly in the region of £40 million a year.

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lifetime awards of disability living allowance are in payment for *(a)* lower, *(b)* middle and *(c)* higher rate of care component and (i) lower and (ii) higher rate of mobility component. [62540]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Disability Living Allowance awards made "for life" which were in payment at 31 May 19998

	Thousand
Care component	
highest rate	264
middle rate	361
lowest rate	331
Mobility component	
higher rate	1,110
lower rate	239

Notes:

The term "for life" means that payment can be made indefinitely provided the conditions for receipt continue to be satisfied. Many beneficiaries receive both components.

Source:

Analytical Services Division: 5 per cent. data

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate his Department has made of the number of new claimants who will not be eligible for severe disablement allowance under his proposed reforms. [62339]

Mr. Timms: We estimate that 16,000 people per year would not receive Severe Disablement Allowance under the reforms proposed in our discussion document "Support for Disabled People". However, current statistical data indicate that nearly 70 per cent. of these

will qualify for Income Support as they do at present, so that, for the majority, their benefit income will not be reduced.

Housing Benefit

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to change housing benefit entitlement for those under 25 years of age. [62280]

Angela Eagle: We are considering all aspects of the Housing Benefit rules as part of our current simplification and improvement review.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list each of the measures which limit the rent which may be covered by housing benefit; and if he will estimate the cost to the Exchequer of removing each one. [62349]

Angela Eagle: The measures which limit the rent for Housing Benefit purposes are:

certain service charges included in the contractual rent which are not generally eligible for Housing Benefit, for example, charges for cleaning, laundry, fuel, meals and personal care and nursing;

the range of determinations made by rent officers in respect of most claims from tenants living in the private rented sector; and

where local authorities consider that the rent is unreasonably high or the accommodation overlarge or the eligible rent is nonetheless too high in respect of a particular case.

Due to the number of reasons which could limit the contractual rent, on which data are not held, it is not possible to estimate the cost of removing each one.

Benefit Payments

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans his Department has to abolish the Giro payment system for social security benefits. [62622]

Mr. Denham: This Department is presently working with Post Office Counters Ltd. and ICL Pathway, the Private Finance Initiative supplier, on a project to replace girocheques and order books with a magnetic stripe card for people who wish to collect their benefit at the Post Office.

National Insurance Recording System

Mr. Wyatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security for what reasons the computer system for programming payments for self-employed people will not be operational until spring 1999. [61475]

Mr. Timms: The computer system to which the hon. Member refers is the National Insurance Recording System (NIRS2). As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State explained in his letter of 11 September to hon. Members, there have been some implementation problems with NIRS2. However, no data have been lost and no records have been destroyed as a result.

NIRS2 has been processing payments from self-employed contributors since 13 July 1998. Collections from self-employed contributors have been made through the established Direct Debit and Quarterly Billing methods and to date we have collected over £269 million in National Insurance Contributions.

Due to the scale, complexity and sensitivity of the NIRS2 system it has been thoroughly tested prior to acceptance by the Contributions Agency. There are still some functions within the NIRS2 computer system that are being piloted, including the registration of newly self-employed contributors.

The computer system is being introduced using a phased release strategy. The final phase, combining Release 2 and Release 3, is planned for April 1999.

Bereavement Benefits

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the SERPS element previously paid in the widow's pension will in future be paid under the widowed parent's allowance. [62615]

Angela Eagle: Under our proposals for new bereavement benefits, those widows who qualify for Widow's Pension at the point of change will continue to receive benefit including any SERPS whilst they satisfy the entitlement conditions. Widowed parents who become entitled to the Widowed Parent's Allowance will receive any SERPS entitlement based on their late spouse's payment of earnings-related National Insurance contributions since 1978 with the basic element of Widowed Parent's Allowance.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what *(a)* amount and *(b)* percentage of the total of the widow's pension was previously paid as SERPS entitlement. [62616]

Angela Eagle: The average weekly amount of SERPS paid to Widow's Pension recipients in Great Britain at 31 March 1998 was £14.36, which represents 24 per cent. of their average total weekly entitlement.

Source:

5 per cent. sample from the Pensions Strategy Computer System.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what element of the widowed parent's allowance will be paid as SERPS entitlement. [62617]

Angela Eagle: As with the current Widowed Mother's Allowance, SERPS entitlement based on the late spouse's payment of earnings-related National Insurance contributions since 1978 will be paid with the basic element of Widowed Parent's Allowance.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the cost of introducing the new bereavement allowance *(a)* for widows and *(b)* for widowers for (i) 2001–2, (ii) 2002–3, (iii) 2003–4 and (iv) 2020, excluding savings resulting from the abolition of the widow's pension. [62592]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Estimated increased expenditure associated with the introduction of the bereavement allowance for (a) widows and (b) widowers, excluding savings resulting from the abolition of the widow's pension

£million 1998–99 benefit rates

	Bereavement allowance for widows	*Bereavement allowance for widowers*
2001–02	20	10
2002–03	30	10

Estimated increased expenditure associated with the introduction of the bereavement allowance for (a) widows and (b) widowers, excluding savings resulting from the abolition of the widow's pension

£ million 1998–99 benefit rates

	Bereavement allowance for widows	*Bereavement allowance for widowers*
2003–04	30	10
2020	50	'

' Denotes less than £25 million

Notes:

1. Estimates are presented net of means-tested benefit offsets, in line with those in "A new contract for welfare: support in bereavement". Means-tested benefit offsets were estimated using the 1995–96 Family Resources Survey and the Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries. They assume a constant offset ratio in order to provide illustrative estimates for 2020.
2. The underlying contributory benefit effects have been provided by the Government Actuary's Department.
3. Estimates for the first three years are rounded to the nearest £10 million.
4. Estimates for 2020 provide broad orders of magnitude and are rounded to the nearest £50 million.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how many widows and widowers will be eligible for means tested benefits following withdrawal of the bereavement allowance after six months. [61459]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 30 November 1998]:* The information is in the table.

Estimates of the number of widows and widowers who would start to receive or continue to receive means-tested benefits once their bereavement allowance has been exhausted

Benefit	*2001–02*	*2002–03*	*2003–04*
Income Support	less than 5,000	10,000	20,000
Housing Benefit	less than 5,000	less than 5,000	10,000
Council Tax Benefit	less than 5,000	10,000	10,000

Notes:

1. Estimates for later years include the effect of the build up through time of the number of ex-recipients of Bereavement Allowance. It is not possible to be more exact.
2. The estimates presented above are broad orders of magnitude. They are rounded to the nearest 10,000 but are not necessarily accurate to that degree.
3. Estimates assume that a constant proportion of those affected by the proposed changes to Bereavement Benefits move on or off each of the means-tested benefits.
4. Estimates use information from the 1995–96 Family Resources Survey, the Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry and forecasts from the Government Actuary's Department concerning the number of men and women affected by the proposed changes.
5. Some widows and widowers will receive more than one of the means-tested benefits. However, the estimates across means-tested benefits cannot be summed to provide an estimate of the total number of people affected by the changes.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many widows and widowers his Department estimates will be entitled to the bereavement allowance; and how many will have the benefit withdrawn after six months when the allowance is introduced in 2001. [61458]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 30 November 1998]:* In the first full year following implementation, it is estimated that the average number of widows and widowers in receipt of bereavement benefits, at any one time, will be 50,000. Of these 20,000 will be entitled to the Bereavement Allowance which will end after 6 months for all.

Notes:

1. Numbers of widows and widowers have been supplied by the Government Actuary's Department.
2. Numbers are rounded to the nearest 10,000.
3. These estimates are intended to represent broad orders of magnitude.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the savings from the abolition of the widow's pension in *(a)* 2001–2, *(b)* 2002–3, *(c)* 2003–4 and *(d)* 2020, excluding the introduction of the bereavement allowance. [62591]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Estimated savings associated with the abolition of the widow's pension excluding the introduction of the bereavement allowance

£ million 1998–99 benefit rates

	Abolition of widow's pension
2001–02	30
2002–03	90
2003–04	140
2020	700

Notes:

1. Estimates are presented net of means-tested benefit offsets, in line with those in "A new contract for welfare: support in bereavement". Means-tested benefit offsets were estimated using the 1995–96 Family Resources Survey and the Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiries. They assume a constant offset ratio in order to provide illustrative estimates for 2020.
2. The underlying contributory benefit effects have been provided by the Government Actuary's Department.
3. Estimates for the first three years are rounded to the nearest £10 million.
4. Estimates for 2020 provide broad orders of magnitude and are rounded to the nearest £50 million.
5. The savings quoted above refer to only one element of the recently announced package of reforms to Bereavement benefits, which also include extending benefits to widowers and doubling the lump sum Bereavement Payment. The net savings in 2020 from the whole package amounts to £500 million.

Attendance Allowance

Mr. Rooney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lifetime awards of attendance allowance are in payment for *(a)* lower and *(b)* higher rate of benefit. [62538]

Mr. Timms: The table shows the number of awards made "for life" which were in payment at 31 May 1998. The term "for life" means that payment can be made indefinitely provided the conditions for receipt continue to be satisfied.

Attendance allowance awards made 'for life'

Thousand

	Number
Higher rate	509
Lower rate	706

Source:
Analytical Services Division: 5 per cent. data

Family Credit

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the average weekly income is for families in receipt of family credit broken down between the amount received in *(a)* pay and *(b)* family credit for a one parent family with (i) one child, (ii) two children and (iii) three children. [62579]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Average weekly income of lone parent family credit recipients split by number of children, net earnings and weekly family credit

Number of children	Number of cases	Total average income from net earnings and weekly Family Credit (£)	Average net earnings (£)	Average weekly Family Credit (£)
All lone parents	377,000	152.14	92.66	59.48
1 child	194,000	143.96	93.39	50.57
2 children	128,000	155.99	93.06	62.93
3 children	43,000	169.04	90.52	78.52

Notes:

1. Figures based on a 5 per cent. sample of Family Credit awards and as such are subject to a degree of sampling error.
2. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand and may not sum due to totals.
3. Figures do not include income from other benefits, e.g. Child Benefit, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit.
4. Figures include dependants aged 16–18 who are included in the calculation of the Family Credit award.
5. Lone parents with 1 to 3 children do not sum to the total for all lone parents as there are also lone parents with 4 or more children in receipt of Family Credit.

Source:

May 1998 Family Credit Quarterly Statistical Enquiry.

Lone Parents

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many initial letters inviting lone parents to participate in the New Deal for Lone Parents have been issued; how many initial interviews have been (i) booked; and (ii) carried out; how many lone parents have agreed to participate; and how many lone parents participating in the New Deal for Lone Parents have found jobs. [63091]

Angela Eagle: The New Deal for Lone Parents started running in Phase 1 in eight lead areas of the country in July 1997. A national service became available to all lone parents making a new claim for Income Support in Phase 2 in April 1998, and to all lone parents receiving Income Support in Phase 3 in October 1998.

Using the latest information from July 1997 to 23 October 1998 which covers the period to the end of Phase 2 of the New Deal for Lone Parents, the number of letters issued is 50,612; the number of initial interviews booked is 30,826; the number of initial interviews carried out is 23,300; the number of agreements to participate is 20,191, which equates to 87 per cent. of lone parents who attend an initial interview agreeing to take part in the New Deal for Lone Parents; and a total of 5,429 lone parents participating in the New Deal for Lone Parents have found jobs, which is 27 per cent. of those joining the programme.

The prototype Phase 1 of the New Deal for Lone Parents is undergoing independent evaluation. The final report comparing the outcomes for lone parents in the eight New Deal for Lone Parents prototype areas will be published in autumn 1999.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list for each employment service region, how many lone parents there are *(a)* in total, *(b)* with children under five years of age and *(c)* with children over five years of age. [61964]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is in the tables.

Lone parents in employment by Government Office Region, spring 1997

Government Office Region	Lone parents in employment
Great Britain	675,000
North East	30,000
North West	100,000
Yorkshire & Humberside	65,000
East Midlands	50,000
West Midlands	60,000
Eastern	60,000
London	80,000
South East	85,000
South West	45,000
Wales	40,000
Scotland	55,000

Notes:

1. Figures are rounded to the nearest 10,000.
2. It is not possible to disaggregate the regional figures by age of youngest child because this will generate caseloads of below 10,000 for some regions. Caseloads below this size are based on samples which are too small to be statistically reliable.
3. The table includes all lone parents in paid employment, self-employment and on government training schemes.
4. Lone parents defined as single people with at least one dependent child. This figure will include a small number of disabled and pensioner lone parents.

Source:

Spring 1997 Labour Force Survey using household adjusted weighting factors.

Lone parents on Income Support by Government Office Region, by age of the youngest child, May 1998

Thousand

Region	All cases	Youngest child aged Under 5	Youngest child aged 5 or over
Great Britain	961	480	482
North East	50	25	25
North West	138	70	69
Yorks & Humberside	83	43	40
East Midlands	58	30	29
West Midlands	86	44	42
Eastern	69	33	36
London	179	87	92
South East	93	46	47
South West	62	30	32
Wales	52	27	25
Scotland	90	44	45

Notes:

1. Lone parents are defined as single people with dependants who do not receive a disability or pensioner premium.
2. Figures are based on the age of the youngest child.
3. The table is based on a 5 per cent. sample.
4. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand and therefore may not sum.

Source:

Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 1998.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to review the jobseeker's allowance regulations to help unemployed people waiting to receive redundancy payments; and if he will make a statement. [62252]

Angela Eagle: We are aware that, under existing rules, if money is owed from an insolvent employer full benefit cannot always be paid to ex-employees claiming Jobseeker's Allowance and, as a consequence, many may have to rely on hardship payments until the matter is resolved.

Since this problem came to our attention we have been working to simplify the complex legislation in this area and we are currently considering proposals for changes to the relevant benefit rules.

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the number of children in families on *(a)* supplementary benefit or income support and *(b)* income-based jobseeker's allowance for (i) 1997 and (ii) 1998, and for each year these as a proportion of all children in the UK. [62104]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Number and percentage of children in families on Income Support and income related Jobseeker's Allowance

Thousand

	Number of children	*Percentage of all children*
Income Support		
May 1997	2,410	19.9
May 1998	2,328	19.2
Income-based Jobseeker's Allowance		
May 1997	436	3.6
February 1998	356	2.9

Notes:

1. The May 1998 Jobseeker's Allowance Quarterly Statistical Enquiry is not yet available.
2. Children are defined as aged 0 to 15.
3. Population figures are based on an estimated resident population at mid-1997 for the United Kingdom
4. Based on a 5 per cent. sample of Income Support and Jobseeker's Allowance claimants and as such are subject to a degree of sampling error.
5. Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand.

Sources:

1. Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 1997 and May 1998.
2. Jobseeker's Allowance Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, May 1997 and February 1998 Population Estimates Unit, Office for National Statistics.

Benefits (Expenditure)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer of 30 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *101–02*, on social security expenditure, if he will list the new economic assumptions used in the pre-Budget report; and what estimate he has made of the future levels of increases or decreases in caseload. [62643]

Mr. Darling: Forecasts of Social Security benefit expenditure in the Pre-Budget Report take into account the economic assumptions set out in Table B5 and Paragraph B9 of the Report. Estimates of future caseloads for each benefit are in the table.

Thousand

	1998–99	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Retirement Pension	10,645	10,772	10,867	10,928
Widow's Benefit	274	268	264	261
Incapacity Benefit—Short Term (LR)	118	115	117	118
Incapacity Benefit—Short Term (HR) and Long Term	1,571	1,550	1,559	1,598
Maternity Allowance	13	13	13	13
Guardian's Allowance and CSA	3	3	3	3
Non-Contributory Retirement Pension	25	24	23	23
War Pension	311	299	286	273
Attendance Allowance	1,250	1,306	1,361	1,409
Invalid Care Allowance	380	403	428	454
Severe Disablement Allowance	453	475	496	516
Disability Living Allowance	2,024	2,115	2,223	2,363
Disability Working Allowance	16	14	0	0
Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit and REA and RA	373	385	396	409
Industrial Death Benefit	18	17	17	16
Other II benefits	1	1	1	1
Earnings Top-up pilots	22	23	10	1
Jobseeker's Allowance—Contribution-based	214	216	216	217
Jobseeker's Allowance—Income-based	1,030	1,015	1,015	1,015
Income Support (IS)—Under Age 60	2,241	2,251	2,267	2,292
of which:				
IS—Short Term and Disabled	176	174	173	173
IS—Long Term and Disabled	960	1,009	1,061	1,116
IS—Families	954	914	874	836
IS—Widows and Others	148	142	148	151
Income Support—(Elderly)	1,683	1,798	1,909	2,021
Child Benefit—Number of children	12,769	12,762	12,771	12,762
Child Benefit—Number of families	7,067	7,062	7,076	7,085
One Parent Benefit	1,037	934	850	776
Family Credit	792	607	0	0
Rent Allowance	1,789	1,845	1,925	2,025
Council Tax Benefit/CCB	5,276	5,188	5,167	5,236
Rent Rebate	2,608	2,498	2,421	2,376

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Theatres

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what steps *(a)* his Department and *(b)* the Arts Council take to establish the financial soundness of theatres which are supported by public funds. [61978]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* Decisions relating to the funding of individual artforms and organisations, including theatres, are a matter for the Arts Council of England. It is therefore for the Arts

Council to satisfy itself as to an organisation's financial viability. It does this through a staged assessment procedure, which includes checks both before and after a grant is made.

World Heritage Sites

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will set out the timetable and procedure for UK World Heritage Site nominations before they are put forward to UNESCO. [62049]

Mr. Alan Howarth: Following consultations with Ministerial colleagues in other interested Departments, my right hon. Friend hopes to announce the new Tentative List of potential UK World Heritage Sites within the next two or three months. this will comprise the sites which the Government will nominate to UNESCO for World Heritage status over the next five to ten years. All such nominations will need to be accompanied by Management Plans for the sites. These Plans will need to be drawn up in consultation with site owners and other bodies, and progress on their development will influence the order and timing of individual nominations.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if the Atlantic Frontier Continental Shelf World Heritage Site nomination was, for the purposes of the review of responses to the Government public consultation, classed as a Scottish site. [62048]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Scotland, has taken responsibility for considering, in consultation with other interested Departments, responses to the public consultation suggesting that the Atlantic Frontier Continental Shelf should be included in the new Tentative List for the UK of potential World Heritage Sites.

Sports Coaches

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much lottery funding has been used to support sports coaches and trainers in the last 12 months. [62177]

Mr. Banks: Lottery funding to support sports coaches and trainers is distributed through the Lottery Sports Fund's World Class Performance Programme. Since the Programme began on 1 January 1997, the Lottery Sports Fund has committed a total of £43,818,416 to 37 sports, including disability sports, and supported a total of 1,816 athletes representing England and Great Britain. The English Sports Council is unable to provide a figure for the funds spent specifically on the employment of coaches and trainers or a separate breakdown for the last twelve months.

Of the £43,818,416 committed, £27,434,930 has been allocated to governing bodies as performance awards to cover technical support costs; and £16,383,487 has been allocated direct to individual athletes for subsistence costs. £8,230,479—30 per cent.—of the performance awards has been spent by the governing bodies on staffing costs, primarily on the employment of world class coaches and trainers. The subsistence awards to individual athletes include personal training funding to cover the costs of membership to sports clubs that have sports coaches, and personal trainers, such as strength coaches.

Royal Parks Agency

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people were employed by the Royal Parks Agency in each year since 1993 *(a)* in total and *(b)* by area of responsibility. [60974]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* Responsibility for the subject of this question has been delegated to the Royal Parks Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. David Welch. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Viviane Robertson to Mr. Richard Ottaway, dated 7 December 1998:

In the absence of the Chief Executive, Mr. David Welch, the Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport has asked me to reply to your parliamentary question concerning staffing levels in the Royal Parks.

The number of people employed by the Royal Parks Agency in each year since 1993, in total and by area of responsibility, is set out in the table below. The numbers are as 31 March of each year.

	1994	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*1998*
General Management and Administration	65	61	61	50	51
Horticultural Management	22	28	28	21	19
Royal Parks Constabulary	190	163	163	162	166
Gamekeepers/Grooms	8	8	8	3	3
Total	285	260	260	236	239

Press Authority

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make it his policy to set up an independent press authority. [61430]

Janet Anderson: The Government prefer self-regulation, overseen by the independent Press Complaints Commission, to any form of statutory regulation. An independent press authority set up by Government would be statutory regulation of the press, and the Government, in the absence of evidence of a collapse of standards, would be unwilling to consider undermining the authority of the Press Complaints Commission in this way.

Braille Grant

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans his Department has for the future of the Braille Grant; and if he will make a statement. [62231]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* My Department's consultation paper "The Comprehensive Spending Review: A New Approach to Investment in Culture", proposed that the grant currently paid to the Royal National Institute for the Blind in support of its embossed literature service should be re-allocated to the Library and Information Commission to enable blind and visually impaired people to benefit more extensively from public library services than they do at present. This would help create a fresh impetus to the provision of library services to blind and visually impaired people and provide the opportunity for local

authorities to embed these services into the mainstream library service. We will be announcing the results of the consultation exercise later this month.

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is his e-mail address. [62566]

Mr. Chris Smith: My e-mail address is chris.smith@culture.gov.uk.

Digital Terrestrial Television

Mr. Peter Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will list those areas of the United Kingdom which are unable to receive the full subscription services offered by ON digital through the digital terrestrial network; [60968]

(2) if he will list the percentage of households which will be unable to receive digital terrestrial channels in the counties of *(a)* Northumberland and *(b)* Cumbria; [60969]

(3) if he will list those areas of the United Kingdom which are unable to receive the full range of free-to-air digital terrestrial channels. [60967]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 30 November 1998]:* The launch phase of digital terrestrial television has been jointly planned by the BBC and Independent Television Commission so that the 81 transmitters used will reach around 90 per cent. of the UK population by the end of 1999, though the coverage of all six multiplexes will vary and in some cases be less. Extending digital services beyond the reach of the first 81 digital terrestrial transmitters was one of the issues raised in our consultation paper "Television: the Digital Future" the responses to which are currently being considered.

I understand that digital terrestrial television services will reach Cumbria and Northumberland from the Caldbeck, Chatton, Pontop Pike, Fenham, Selkirk and Lancaster transmitters. Transmissions from Pontop Pike have already commenced and the remainder will become operational during 1999. The BBC and ITC have produced a CD-Rom containing coverage predictions for each multiplex for each transmitter site in the UK. Copies of the CD-Rom have already been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

PRIME MINISTER

House of Lords

Dr. Harris: To ask the Prime Minister if Government policy on the voting and sitting rights of the hereditary Peers applies to those members of the Royal Family who sit in the House of Lords. [61482]

The Prime Minister: Our detailed proposals will be set out in a White Paper to be published in the context of the Bill which we shall introduce later this Session to remove the rights of hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. As part of this, the Government would not intend to propose special arrangements for Royal Members of the House of Lords.

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Prime Minister what is his e-mail address. [62558]

The Prime Minister: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave the hon. Member for South Dorset (Mr. Bruce) on 20 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *389*.

Cabinet Advisers

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Prime Minister (1) if he will appoint a chief engineering adviser to the Cabinet with responsibilities separate from those of the Chief Scientific Adviser; [61903]

(2) if he will list the areas of responsibility of the Chief Scientific Adviser to the Cabinet. [61904]

The Prime Minister: There is no need for such an appointment.

The responsibility of my Chief Scientific Adviser embraces the provision of advice on engineering issues, in addition to the whole spectrum of science and technology matters. He is also head of the Office of Science and Technology with responsibility for its cross-departmental functions.

Lockerbie

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister when in December he expects to meet the Lockerbie relatives. [62852]

The Prime Minister: I will meet a group of the Lockerbie relatives on 10 December.

Social Exclusion Unit

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Prime Minister what progress the Social Exclusion Unit has made in its first year; and if he will announce the new membership of the Ministerial Network on Social Exclusion. [63135]

The Prime Minister: I established the Social Exclusion Unit in December 1997. I asked it to focus on the following priorities in its first phase of work to July 1998:

Truancy and School Exclusion: to make a step change in the scale of truancy and exclusions from school, and to find better solutions for those who have to be excluded.

Street Living: reducing to as near to zero as possible the numbers sleeping rough in towns and cities.

Worst Estates: developing integrated and sustainable approaches to the problems of the worst housing estates, including crime, drugs, unemployment, community breakdown, bad schools etc.

All of these are areas where action was long overdue. The Unit has reported to me on each, with a full analysis of the problem and concrete and imaginative recommendations for action, all of which I have accepted. Those recommendations are now being implemented. To take forward the work on deprived neighbourhoods, a major process of policy formulation has begun, which will contribute to a National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal to be published in early 2000. This work is the biggest piece of joined up government ever attempted—eighteen policy teams, ten Ministers and departments

across Whitehall are working together to address some of the most intractable problems faced by deprived neighbourhoods.

These pieces of work have clearly shown the benefit of a central Unit which covers the policies of a number of Government departments, and which works at great speed with a membership of civil servants and outside experts. Other parts of Government are already learning the lessons of this method of working.

The Unit's main priorities are now:

the follow up work on poor neighbourhoods, and two new topics:

1. Teenage parents—to work with other Departments, building particularly on the work already undertaken by the Department of Health, to develop an integrated strategy to cut rates of teenage parenthood, particularly under age parenthood, towards the European average and propose better solutions to combat the risk of social exclusion for vulnerable teenage parents and their children. This work will report to Ministers early in the New Year.
2. 16 to 18 year olds—to work with other Departments to assess how many 16 to 18 year olds are not in education, work or training, analyse the reasons why and produce proposals to reduce the numbers significantly. To report to Ministers by Easter 1999.

The Unit was set up on a time limited experimental basis. Its current work programme will take it until Summer 2000 at least. Its success will be reviewed in Summer 1999, and a decision announced about its longer term future and work programme.

I have expanded the membership of the Ministerial Network on Social Exclusion to include Ministers from the Scottish Office, the Northern Ireland Office and the Welsh Office. This will help to ensure that the lessons of good practice are learned in each country. The Network is made up of Ministers from the Departments working most closely with the Unit, to act as its champions and to help guide and present its work. Its membership is:

Minister	*Department*
Stephen Byers	HM Treasury (Chair)
Hilary Armstrong	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Paul Boateng	Home Office
John Denham	Department of Social Security
Lord Falconer	Cabinet Office
Peter Hain	Welsh Office
Tessa Jowell	Department of Health
Geoffrey Robinson	HM Treasury
Barbara Roche	Department of Trade and Industry
Lord Sewel of Gilcomstoun	Scottish Office
John McFall	Northern Ireland Office
Andrew Smith	Department for Education and Employment

Franco-British Summit

Mr. Campbell-Savours: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the Franco-British Summit on 3 to 4 December. [63089]

The Prime Minister: The twenty-first British-French Summit took place in St. Malo on 3 and 4 December. It was a substantive summit in a cordial atmosphere, with worthwhile exchanges on a wide range of European, economic and other issues. The Summit resulted in Joint Declarations on European Defence and Co-operation in Africa. The texts of the Declarations have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police and Prison Officers (Kenya)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what training schemes are supported by his Department for the training of police and prison officers employed in the services in Kenya; and if he will make a statement. [62183]

Mr. Boateng: The Home Office are not at present supporting any training programmes specifically designed for police or prison officers in Kenya.

Training arrangements for police officers from Kenya would normally be funded by the Department for International Development or by the Foreign Office. Ten Kenyan police officers have attended various training courses in Britain in the last four years, including three who attended command courses at Bramshill Police College. Also, under a United Kingdom development assistance project run in Kenya by the Department for International Development, training is currently being provided for senior command officers in the Kenyan police service. This training includes management and operational skills. Under the same project, support is also being given to develop and include a human rights component in Kenyan police training programmes.

All the training courses provided by Prison Service Training Services are also available to members of the Kenyan Prison Service, subject to availability, security and financial considerations.

Prisons (Cells)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisons in England and Wales currently have prisoners held two to a cell designed for one. [62184]

Mr. George Howarth: Of the 133 prisons open at the end of October 1998, 63 had prisoners held two to a cell designed for one.

These data are provisional and subject to validation by prisons.

Prisons (Drugs)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on reducing the level of illegal drug use in prisons in England and Wales. [62185]

Mr. George Howarth: In May this year, I launched the Prison Service Drug Strategy which set out a framework for improving the assessment and treatment of drug misusers in prison and for reducing the supply of drugs into prison. Since then, the Prison Service has been allocated an extra £76m over the next three financial years from the Comprehensive Spending Review to implement that strategy. Prison Service officials are currently working with the United Kingdom Anti Drugs Co-ordination Unit, probation services and external drugs

agencies to create specifications, services and outputs, and to identify the specific needs of individual prisons and groups of prisoners.

Prisons (Staff)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison officers are currently suspended from duty due to allegations which have been made against them by prison inmates at prisons in England and Wales. [62181]

Mr. George Howarth: On 2 December 1998, there were 44 staff suspended from duty as a result of allegations made by prisoners at prisons in England and Wales.

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the pilot project on the introduction of new-style security passes for prison staff; and from what date it is proposed that wearing the new-style passes is to be mandatory. [62225]

Mr. George Howarth: Evaluation of the pilot exercise, which took place between April and July this year, did not uncover any major problems. Minor practical improvements have been made to the design of the pass holder.

An instruction about the wearing of the new security pass is being prepared in consultation with the Prison Service trade unions. The issue of the pass is expected to begin shortly and be completed by April 1999. The wearing of the new pass will be mandatory from the time it is issued.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions public funds have been used to pay the debts of (i) staff messes and (ii) staff clubs, in Prison Service establishments; and what was the total amount so spent in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [61906]

Mr. George Howarth: The Prison Service has kept central records only since 1 April 1995. Since then, records show that public funds have been used on two occasions to pay the debts of staff messes in Prison Service establishments. The sums involved were as follows:

£

Year	*Amount*
1995–96	23,898
1996–97	2,675
1997–98	nil

Over the same period, public funds have been used on four occasions to pay the debts of staff clubs in Prison Service establishments. The sums involved were as follows:

£

Year	*Amount*
1995–96	nil
1996–97	18,253
1997–98	35,717

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his e-mail address. [62561]

Mr. Straw: Correspondence sent to me at the Home Office e-mail address, ho.gen@gtnet.gov.uk, is forwarded to me as necessary.

The Department is putting plans in place to connect selected parts of the office to the Government Secure Intranet (GSI) followed by full interconnection between the core network and the GSI in the first half of 1999. That will enable full e-mail between the office, Members of both Houses and members of the public.

Millennium (Emergency Cover)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans his Department has to contract with the armed services to provide emergency cover over the millennium period; and what estimate he has made of the cost of that cover. [62573]

Mr. George Howarth: No contract is necessary. Procedures are already in place for the provision of military aid to the civil authority, and these arrangements are under regular review in the run up to the Millennium date change. I could not offer an estimate at this stage.

Absinthe

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the implications for his policy regarding the availability of narcotics of the proposal of Green Bohemia to sell absinthe. [62569]

Mr. George Howarth: I have identified no such implications. Absinthe does not come within the scope either of domestic legislation on the misuse of drugs or of the international conventions on the control of narcotic or psychotropic substances.

Prison Statistics

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women under the age of 20 years were serving a prison sentence in England and Wales on 1 November. [62020]

Mr. George Howarth: The latest available provisional information is for 31 October 1998. On that date, there were 5,206 sentenced males and 224 sentenced females aged under 20 years in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales.

Information on the number of sentenced persons aged under 20 years (by individual age) is published in successive volumes of "Prison Statistics England and Wales" (table 3.2 of the 1997 edition, cm 4017), copies of which are in the Library.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many (i) men and (ii) women were sentenced to imprisonment in England and Wales during each of the last three years for *(a)* non-payment of fines, *(b)* use of or trading in illegal drugs, *(c)* shoplifting, *(d)* abuse towards children and *(e)* involvement in violent crimes. [62018]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is given in the table. I regret that no information is available for shoplifting as this offence is not separately coded on the central prisons computer.

The information given in the table is published in successive volumes of "Prison Statistics England and Wales" (tables 1.12, 3.8 and 4.5 of the 1997 edition, Cm 4017), copies of which are available in the Library.

Receptions under sentence into prisons in England and Wales by offence, 1995–97

Offence	1995		1996		1997	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	Males	Females
Fine Default	18,787	1,370	8,094	641	5,964	372
Drugs[1]	4,325	404	5,525	575	6,324	750
Cruelty to children[2]	376	22	471	27	541	41
Violence against the person	8,830	454	10,005	524	11,053	660

[1] Includes drugs production, supply, possession with intent, possession, unlawful import/export and other drugs offences.
[2] Includes cruelty to children and gross indecency with children.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women over the age of 65 years are serving prison sentences in England and Wales. [62019]

Mr. George Howarth: The latest available provisional information is for 31 October 1998. On that date, there were 319 sentenced males and 5 sentenced females aged over 65 years in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales.

Electronic Tagging

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current number of offenders who are electronically tagged in England and Wales. [62021]

Mr. George Howarth: As of 30 November 1998, 505 offenders are being electronically monitored in England and Wales under the Criminal Justice Act 1991 and the Crime Sentences Act 1997. There are an additional 21 cases in which electronic monitoring has been imposed as a condition of bail.

Firearms Compensation Scheme

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will reply to the letter sent to him by the hon. Member for North Thanet on 19 October; if he will state the rights of appeal against his Department's interpretation of his July 1997 guidelines relating to the firearms compensation scheme; if he will define ancillary equipment; and if he will make a statement. [62499]

Mr. Boateng: A reply will be sent shortly. Ancillary equipment qualifying for compensation under the firearms compensation scheme is defined in the scheme as equipment used in connection with prohibited large-calibre handguns which has no practicable use with a non-prohibited firearm and which is specified in Annex C of the scheme. The Firearms Compensation Section guidance note of July 1997 explains why certain types of tools, equipment and shooting accessories are excluded from the scheme by this definition. It is open to claimants to explain why the items they have surrendered ought to qualify for compensation, and all such representations are carefully considered. However, where items are outside the scope of the scheme, no compensation can be paid on them.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62837]

Mr. Straw: Two special advisers work in my Department. Justin Russell advises me on policy matters and Ed Owen is my adviser on media and political matters. They are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements.

Prison Sentences (Alternatives)

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how he plans to respond to the Third report of the Home Affairs Committee of session 1997–98 into Alternatives to Prison Sentences (HC 486). [63052]

Mr. Straw: This is a useful and constructive report and the Government's detailed response to it is being published today.

The report makes a large number of observations and recommendations. It says that community sentences can and should be rigorous and that, if they are to be credible, they must be enforced stringently. The Government endorse that view as our response indicates. The report also welcomes many of the measures which the Government have already taken to extend the range and flexibility of community sentences and to ensure that intervention takes place at an earlier stage, especially when dealing with juvenile crime.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Asylum Hearings

Dr. Harris: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the effect of transferring the hearing of asylum appeal cases outside London on the presence of legal representatives of asylum seekers at such hearings. [61705]

Mr. Hoon: The Immigration Appellate Authority is monitoring the number of appellants whose cases are transferred out of London and the level of representation at those hearings. The hearings of the transferred cases stared in October 1998 so it is too soon to draw any conclusions.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what checks court interpreters in asylum hearings are subject to; and when these checks were introduced. [61706]

Mr. Hoon: Interpreters in appeal hearings have always been required to complete a standard application form. This includes a status inquiry where they are required to declare anything that may undermine their suitability to perform interpreting functions on behalf of the IAA. Since 1996–97, the IAA has run an assessment and training programme (in close conjunction with the Institute of Linguists) to improve the quality of in-court interpreting. Adjudicators are also encouraged to provide general feedback to the IAA interpreter manager on the performance of individual interpreters.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many persons intending to be court interpreters in asylum hearings have failed to pass security checks; and what action was taken as a result. [61707]

Mr. Hoon: There is no formal mechanism in place to security check interpreters. However, they are required to complete a standard status enquiry form prior to appointment. Applications may be rejected by the IAA if the information provided questions the interpreter's competence or suitability to perform the job.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many asylum seekers were unrepresented at hearings *(a)* in London and *(b)* out of London when the asylum seeker (i) had and (ii) did not have an immigration solicitor in the most recent year for which figures are available. [61708]

Mr. Hoon: No figures are kept on the levels of representation at the London centres. In October 1998 the IAA started to keep figures relating to the levels of representation at hearings outside London to monitor the impact of transferring appeals to provincial centres.

Dr. Harris: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to monitor the impact of transferring asylum hearings outside London on legal representation at hearings in cases where asylum seekers *(a)* have and *(b)* do not have a solicitor. [61709]

Mr. Hoon: The IAA is currently monitoring the impact of transferring asylum hearings outside London on the levels of representation. The hearings of these appeals started in October 1998 so it is too soon to draw any conclusions.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Micronutrients

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department is taking to support the provision of micronutrients to developing countries. [62359]

Clare Short: The Department for International Development has supported major research in micronutrients supplementation, including the seminal Ghana Vitamin A Supplementation Trial. We contribute to both UNICEF and the World Health Organisation for their work in maternal and child health. Supplementation will be an important element in the further development of our strategy for assistance to child health.

Development Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what the outcome was of the Development Council held in Brussels on 30 November; and if she will make a statement. [62222]

Clare Short: During the morning session, the Council adopted conclusions on Burundi reflecting Ministers' discussions at dinner the previous evening. The conclusions welcome the progress achieved in the 'Arusha process' so far and thank Mwalimu Nyerere for his invaluable contribution. The Council said that it was prepared to continue to support the process and welcomed the intention of Mwalimu Nyerere to suspend sanctions, which would pave the way for the resumption of increased development co-operation. The Council asked the Commission to pursue its discussions with the Burundi government, with a view both to rapid implementation of the support already envisaged for refugees and rehabilitation, and to additional support for human rights and strengthening of democratic institutions and the judicial system.

The Council also adopted conclusions on the Role of Development Co-operation in Strengthening Peace-building, Conflict Prevention and Resolution. These recognise that development assistance needs to be designed and implemented in a way that it helps to address the root causes of violent conflict in a targeted manner. The Council recommended that an expert group be established to take forward work in this area.

On Hurricane Mitch, the Council adopted Conclusions calling on the Commission to prepare an Action Plan on medium to long term reconstruction efforts in Central America which should be discussed in the next few months at a ministerial meeting in the San José Group. The Council stressed the role of debt relief and the importance of donor co-ordination in the reconstruction effort. The UK congratulated the UN on its efforts to co-ordinate relief during the immediate emergency. The UK pointed out that the next phase was to link emergency aid to rehabilitation and longer term construction. The UK hoped donors would share ideas and coordinate not compete. The UK urged all partners to contribute to the French/UK Trust Fund initiative to assist with multilateral debt relief.

On Private Sector Development in Africa, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, the Commission presented its strategy, the aim of which is to contribute to poverty elimination and foster the integration of the ACP into the world economy. The presentation was followed by an exchange of views. The UK welcomed the paper but noted that it would have to be taken forward after discussions had taken place with the ACP countries, and that work was needed on putting the strategy into operation. The Council passed a Resolution on Sustainable Tourism. The UK explained that it was important to ensure more of the benefits of tourism remained in local communities, in particular the poorest and women.

The Commission updated the Council on progress in the Post-Lomé negotiations. The joint EU-ACP Central Negotiating Group had already identified areas of agreement between the EU and ACP sides and issues where more discussion was needed. There was broad consensus on the major objectives of the new Convention. A number of member states, including the UK, urged the Commission and member states to honour the EU mandate commitment on improving preferential access to the EU market for Least Developed Countries under the Generalised System of Preferences from 2000.

Over lunch, I led a discussion on the external assistance aspects of the Financial Perspectives. I stressed the importance of increasing the proportion of EC official development assistance going to low income countries in the years 2000–06. I was broadly supported by a majority of member states.

Other items discussed at lunch included a report on the outcome of the Brussels Conference on Disarmament, on the situation in Angola, and the need for the early release of the third tranche of funds to UN Reliefs Works Agency (UNWRA). There was a brief discussion on EC development assistance to Togo, and future aid to the Palestinians. On the issue of Commission financing of UN Organisations, Commissioner Pinheiro agreed that the current situation; where the Commission is obliged by financial control procedures to audit UN and other multilateral agencies receiving EC funds, should be re-examined.

Sir Stephen Wall represented the UK during the afternoon session. The first item after lunch was a progress report from the Commission on the implementation of the guidelines on Operational Co-ordination. The UK welcomed proposals for greater exchange of strategy papers, the practical application of enhanced co-ordination at country level, more jointly funded projects, sharing of staff and joint missions. We and others stressed that co-ordination procedures should cover all donors and take full account of the central role of the partner country. We also stressed that streamlining procedures was important.

The Council discussed progress on the Global Evaluation of EC development assistance. This is to be completed under the German Presidency and will be one of the main subjects for discussion at the next Development Council in May 1999. The UK called on the Commission to implement the recommendations contained in the Court of Auditors' report on aid to South Africa.

On humanitarian aid, the Council discussed the security of humanitarian aid workers and the situation in Kosovo and Sudan.

A number of issues were discussed under any other business. The Commission responded to the allegations of fraud within ECHO. The Italian Minister reported on the recent Inter Governmental Authority on Development Partners Forum on Somalia held in Rome. The Finnish Minister raised the issue of climate change in developing countries. The Dutch Minister, supported by the UK, urged the Commission to respond positively to the proposal for an independent WTO Legal Advisory Centre to help developing countries use the dispute settlement system that lies at the heart of the WTO.

The Council adopted a Resolution on Indigenous Peoples, Conclusions on Micro-finance and Poverty Reduction, and Conclusions on Democratisation, the Rule of Law, Respect for Human Rights and Good Governance without discussion.

TREASURY

EU Code of Conduct Group

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer on what occasions the EU Code of Conduct Group has met since its formation; and if he will make a statement. [61885]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* The Code of Conduct Group met on 8 May, 16 July, 3 November and 17 November 1998.

Import Duties

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what import duty rates apply to vehicles fuelled by *(a)* petrol or diesel, *(b)* electricity and *(c)* natural gas. [62120]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* The full rates of import duty for vehicles set out in the UK Customs Tariff vary depending on the type of vehicle concerned.

The import duty rates for passengers vehicles, whether gas, diesel or petrol powered, range from 10 to 16.8 per cent. depending on engine size and passenger capacity; whereas the rate for all electric passenger vehicles is 10.5 per cent.

The import duty rates for goods vehicles, whether gas, diesel or petrol powered, range from 10.2 to 22 per cent. depending on the engine size and vehicle weight; whereas the rate for all electric goods vehicles is 10 per cent.

Smuggling (Fuel Oils)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of evidence submitted by HM Customs and Excise in April and May 1998 on the issue of smuggling of fuel oils. [62238]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Both the Government and Customs are aware of the situation with the illegal importation of road fuel into Northern Ireland for resale and recognise that it is a serious problem which disadvantages legitimate traders. Customs are deploying resources and actively mounting investigations against those involved to counter the threat posed to the revenue and to the Northern Ireland business community. Customs are taking the lead on this issue but are acting in conjunction with other authorities, including the Royal Ulster Constabulary, to make seizures of oil tankers and vehicles carrying oil tanks filled with illegally imported fuel for resale. Wherever possible, cases are progressed with a view to criminal prosecution of the individuals involved.

There is little evidence that smuggling of fuel into any other area of the United Kingdom is a cause for concern.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of fuel oil smuggling on retail sales of petrol in South East England. [62237]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* HM Customs and Excise have no estimates for the impact of fuel oil smuggling on retail sales of petrol in South East England.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many petrol tankers have been impounded by HM Customs in each of the last five years. [62234]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* In 1998 to date 48 vehicles have been seized by Customs for alleged smuggling of petroleum products into Northern Ireland and 2 in Liverpool for alleged smuggling onto the UK mainland.

The problem of petroleum smuggling into Northern Ireland has been evident only since late 1997 and indeed this is the reverse of the situation which existed a few years ago when people from the Republic of Ireland would travel to Northern Ireland to purchase cheaper fuel. There were no seizures of vehicles or fuel in years prior to 1998.

Fuel Duties

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what are the total returns for UK duty paid on motor fuel products in Northern Ireland for each quarter of 1996, 1997 and 1998 for which figures are available. [62235]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Customs and Excise are unable to supply figures for duty paid on motor fuel used in Northern Ireland. Duty is paid at the time the oil leaves the refinery on the UK mainland, or at the time of importation into the UK. No separate record is kept by Customs of the destination of the oil.

Taxation Forecasts

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what factors underlie the differences in the forecast for taxation as a share of gross domestic product in *(a)* 1996–97 and *(b)* 1997–98 between (i) the 1998 Economic and Fiscal Strategy report and (ii) the 1998 Pre-Budget report; and if he will make a statement. [62124]

Ms Hewitt: Outturns for receipts of taxes and social security contributions, net of tax credits, were revised down by £0.4 billion in 1996–97 and by £0.7 billion in 1997–98 between the publication of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy Report (EFSR) and the Pre-Budget Report (PBR). This reduced the tax/GDP ratio by less than 0.1 percentage points in both years. Upward revisions to money GDP since the EFSR, of over 1¼ per cent. in 1996–97 and over 2 per cent. in 1997–98, account for the remainder of the downward revision to the tax/GDP ratio in the PBR of 0.6 per cent. in 1996–97 and 0.9 per cent. in 1997–98. These revisions entirely reflect data changes rather than forecasting judgments.

Civil Registration

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps have been taken following the Government's proposals in the consultation paper, "Supporting Families", to commission a review by the Registrar General of the legislation regarding civil registration in England and Wales. [63121]

Ms Hewitt: I have asked the Registrar General for England and Wales to carry out a review of the civil registration service with the aim of producing a public consultation document next summer. The review will consider the existing operational framework and set out options for the future development of the service.

The registration of births, deaths and marriages is based largely on Victorian legislation and the needs of society at that time. This law places strict limitations on the type and extent of the service it can provide to the public. The inflexibility of the service was raised in the Government's consultation document "Supporting Families". Measures to enhance the powers of registrars were also proposed in the White Paper "Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum".

The aim of the review and subsequent consultation will be to develop proposals for a service that can adapt to the changing needs and attitudes of a modern society and that can adopt modern methods and technology to meet those needs.

Inland Revenue Staff

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received relating to the rule that Inland Revenue staff must retire at the age of 60 years. [62031]

Dawn Primarolo: There have been four representations to the Chancellor whilst in office, regarding the requirement for Inland Revenue staff to retire at age 60. All representations were made through constituency MPs. The representations raised concerns about the policy of the Inland Revenue to require retirement of their employees at age 60, with two representations involving individual employees' cases.

VAT (Educational Goods)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the educational goods and computers which are not subject to VAT when bought by schools but are subject to VAT when bought for schools by education action zones. [62299]

Dawn Primarolo: Whether educational goods and computers are liable to VAT does not depend on the purchaser. The VAT incurred by a local education authority on school equipment is recoverable from Customs and Excise whether purchased using its own funds or purchased using those provided by an education action zone.

VAT (Beach Huts)

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much revenue was received in the last financial year from value-added tax on rents of beach huts. [62187]

Dawn Primarolo: We have no estimates on the amount of VAT received from rents of beach huts.

Construction Industry

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is *(a)* the estimated annual revenue charge and *(b)* the number of firms and employees involved in the change from self-employed sub-contractor status to PAYE status in the construction industry. [62221]

Ms Hewitt: The Inland Revenue estimates that in excess of 200,000 workers in the construction industry have been reclassified from self-employed to employed status since April 1997. This has happened for a number of different reasons. Many contractors have carried out their own status reviews and concluded that some or all of their workers should be properly treated as employees. Alternatively, workers may have been reclassified as employees following an IR or CA compliance visit. No estimate is available of the number of firms involved.

Because of the many differences in how the earnings of self employed and employed workers are treated for tax and National Insurance purposes, it is not possible to provide an estimate of the annual revenue charge involved.

National Debt

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the costs of servicing the national debt in 1998–99. [61815]

Mr. Byers: Estimates for the cost of servicing the National Debt are not published, but Table B12 of the November 1998 Pre-Budget Report included an estimate of £29.5 billion for central government gross debt interest payments in 1998–99.

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the current amount of the national debt; and what the interest payments on this currently are. [60911]

Mr. Byers *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* Figures for net public sector debt are published in Table B4 of the November 1998 Pre-Budget Report. For 31 March 1998 the figure is £352 billion. Interest payments and interest and dividends receipts for 1997–98 have been published by the ONS in Table S13 of Financial Statistics, October 1998. These are £29.8 billion and £4.1 billion respectively.

Asset Sales

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what rules his Department applies to allocation between departments of receipts from sales of assets; and what changes have been made since 1 May 1997. [62032]

Mr. Byers: Since 1 May 1997, departments have been given new incentives to recycle receipts from asset sales into new assets, with the National Asset Register helping to identify these surplus assets.

Birth Weight Statistics

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many and what percentage of live births were *(a)* under 2,500g, *(b)* 2,500 to 2,999g, *(c)* 3,000 to 3,499g, *(d)* 3,500 to 3,999g and *(e)* 4,000g and over in (i) Liverpool, (ii) Manchester, (iii) Sheffield and (iv) Leeds in (1) 1993, (2) 1994 and (3) 1995. [62287]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Frank Field, dated 7 December 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on the number of live births for Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield.

The information you requested is as follows:

Number of live births by birthweight and percentages of live births with a stated birthweight for Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Sheffield, 1993–95

Area (Metropoliton districts)	Numbers					
	Under 2,500g	2,500–2,999g	3,000–3,444g	3,500–3,999g	4,000g and over	Not stated
Leeds						
1993	662	1,569	3,326	2,506	888	285
1994	697	1,571	3,147	2,409	890	307
1995	758	1,636	3,192	2,470	835	39
Liverpool						
1993	410	837	1,797	1,435	648	1,203
1994	417	839	1,839	1,534	639	793
1995	487	941	2,082	1,673	698	44
Manchester						
1993	549	1,323	2,421	1,654	577	215
1994	506	1,228	2,232	1,579	563	318
1995	588	1,187	2,111	1,526	498	144
Sheffield						
1993	499	1,129	2,267	2,001	747	48
1994	504	1,043	2,312	1,877	698	42
1995	492	1,110	2,242	1,695	667	46

Percentage of live births with a stated birthweight

Area	Under 2,500g	2,500–2,999g	3,000–3,444g	3,500–3999g	4,000g and over
Leeds					
1993	7.4	17.5	37.2	28.0	9.9
1994	8.0	18.0	36.1	27.6	10.2
1995	8.5	18.4	35.9	27.8	9.4
Liverpool					
1993	8.0	16.3	35.0	28.0	12.6

Percentage of live births with a stated birthweight

Area	*Under 2,500g*	*2,500–2,999g*	*3,000–3,444g*	*3,500–3999g*	*4,000g and over*
1994	7.9	15.9	34.9	29.1	12.1
1995	8.3	16.0	35.4	28.4	11.9
Manchester					
1993	8.4	20.3	37.1	25.4	8.8
1994	8.3	20.1	36.5	25.9	9.2
1995	9.9	20.1	35.7	25.8	8.4
Sheffield					
1993	7.5	17.0	34.1	30.1	11.2
1994	7.8	16.2	35.9	29.2	10.8
1995	7.9	17.9	36.1	27.3	10.7

Source:
ONS

Age Discrimination

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received alleging age discrimination within his Department; and what response he has given. [62494]

Ms Hewitt: The Treasury has received no such representations.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the President of the Council what is her e-mail address. [62879]

Mrs. Beckett: My office's e-mail address is "ecrooks@cabinet-office.gov.uk".

SCOTLAND

World Heritage Site

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the organisations in Scotland involved in reviewing World Heritage Site nominations resulting from the Government's recent consultation. [62052]

Mr. Macdonald: The consultation paper on the new UK tentative list of World Heritage Sites was sent to a wide range of organisations in Scotland. Some 50 responses were received in respect of the cultural heritage sites in Scotland and 30 on the natural heritage sites in Scotland. The Government are currently considering the responses prior to making a final decision on the UK tentative list.

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list those organisations and persons consulted over the Atlantic Frontier Continental Shelf nomination *(a)* before and *(b)* since the World Heritage Site meeting on 12 November. [62047]

Mr. Macdonald: Earlier this year my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport launched a consultation on a revised Tentative List of UK sites to be nominated to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation for World Heritage Site status over the next 5–10 years. During the consultation, a number of additional sites were proposed for inclusion on the Tentative List, including the Atlantic Frontier Continental Shelf. Scottish Natural Heritage was consulted on this proposal prior to the meeting on 12 November 1998. Ministers are collectively considering the responses to the consultation before finalising the Tentative List.

Royal Ordnance Factory, Bishopton

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the impact on the Scottish economy of the closure of the Royal Ordnance factory at Bishopton. [62258]

Mr. Dewar: The response to any particular industrial closure is a matter, in the first instance, for the relevant local enterprise centre.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Defence regarding the closure of the Royal Ordnance factory at Bishopton. [62259]

Mr. Dewar: Ministers and officials in my Department liaise with colleagues in MoD on a routine basis in relation to defence-related issues affecting Scotland.

Scottish Parliament

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to devolve the Government's powers in respect of broadcasting to the Scottish parliament. [62257]

Mr. Galbraith: The subject matter of the Broadcasting Acts 1990 and 1996 and the BBC are reserved. This is consistent with the policy set out in the White Paper, "Scotland's Parliament", which was endorsed by the Scottish voters in the referendum in September 1997.

We have announced plans for executive devolution of certain broadcasting matters to ensure that the Scottish Ministers will have appropriate influence over key appointments to the major broadcasting organisations and that the Scottish Parliament receives formally their annual reports. The function of funding Gaelic broadcasting will also be transferred under executive devolution.

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council must use Scots law practice and precedent in deliberating on disputes relating to the powers of the Scottish Parliament. [62500]

Mr. McLeish: The rules of procedure of the Judicial Committee of the Privy Council will be made by an Order in Council under Section 103(3) of the Scotland Act 1998. They will extend throughout the United Kingdom, as does the Scotland Act 1998 itself. Similarly, the Judicial Committee will not be restricted to applying Scots law in determining cases under the Scotland Act.

Public Defence Solicitors' Office

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what arrangements have been made to ensure that the Public Defence Solicitors' Office and the Scottish Legal Aid Board remain separate organisations. [62406]

Mr. McLeish: The Director of the Public Defence Solicitors' Office (PDSO) reports directly to the Chief Executive, Scottish Legal Aid Board, on administrative matters only. In all other matters, including the handling of cases, the PDSO operates independently of the Board.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the estimated cost is for establishing the Public Defence Solicitors' Office; and what was the estimate given in the context of the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill. [62405]

Mr. McLeish: The estimated cost in 1998–99 of the PDSO is £450,000, including set up and running costs. The previous Government gave no estimate of the comparable costs of this project in the context of the Crime and Punishment (Scotland) Bill.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland on how many occasions representatives of the Public Defence Solicitors' Office have attended meetings of the Scottish Legal Aid Board in each of the last five years. [62407]

Mr. McLeish: Since his appointment on 1 April 1998, Mr. Alistair Watson, Director of the Public Defence Solicitors' Office (PDSO), which opened on 1 October 1998, has attended Board meetings on 6 April and 5 October.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the membership of the Public Defence Solicitors' Office Research Evaluation Project. [62408]

Mr. McLeish: The contract for the research has not yet been awarded. However, when the research team has been appointed, it will report regularly to an advisory group including representatives of the following organisations:

Law Society of Scotland
Scottish Law Agents' Society
Glasgow Bar Association
Edinburgh Bar Association
Faculty of Advocates
Sheriffs' Association
Scottish Legal Aid Board
Public Defence Solicitors' Office
Scottish Office Home Department

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what is his e-mail address. [62557]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary does not have a public e-mail address. Members of the public may submit e-mail via an interactive form on the FCO website (www.fco.gov.uk). These are then passed to the relevant Department for reply, if appropriate.

Scout Jamboree, Chile

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assurances he has sought from the Chilean authorities that British participants in the forthcoming Scout Jamboree in Chile will be welcomed like other national groups. [62204]

Mr. Fatchett *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* At this time of heightened tension in Chile, we advise against all non-essential travel there. The Chilean Government has said that if the British contingent of Scouts decide to proceed with their visit, it will do everything possible to provide protection for them.

Iraq

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports Her Majesty's Government have received of the use of nerve agents by Iraqi forces during (i) the Iran-Iraq war and (ii) the attack on Halabja; and when the first such reports were received. [62513]

Mr. Fatchett: There have been numerous reports about Iraq's use of chemical weapons. The UN Secretary-General first despatched a mission of specialists to investigate allegations of their use in the Iran-Iraq conflict in March 1984. In 1988, he sent a medical specialist to Iran and Iraq to investigate allegations of chemical attacks in Halabja. A report on 25 April 1988 drew together the results of these missions, concluding that nerve agent had been used in both instances.

Far East Prisoners of War

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of reports that funds meant for Far East prisoners of war were retained by the Swiss Government after the war; and if he will make a statement. [62310]

Mr. Fatchett: This is not the first time that a story about alleged misuse of funds paid through Switzerland has been published in the press. In 1995, we carried out a detailed investigation, which concluded that we had no evidence that any money had been misappropriated.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what response Her Majesty's Government have made to the Holy See in respect of the appeal by the Holy See's permanent observer at the United Nations, that all nuclear weapons states should eliminate their nuclear stockpiles. [62391]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We have made clear to all participants at the United Nations First Committee our commitment to nuclear disarmament, the steps we have already taken towards this goal and our views on the best way to make further progress.

Peter Penfold

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if an official of his

Department discussed with Mr. Peter Penfold his Department's consideration of the inclusion of Mr. Penfold's name on the list of those proposed to receive honours in the New Year's Honours List 1998. [62341]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We do not comment on Honours issues.

OSCE Summit

Mr. Tipping: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he intends to make in the Council of Ministers meeting for the OSCE in Oslo on 2 to 3 December regarding the proposal for Turkey to host the next summit of the OSCE in Istanbul in February. [62395]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The OSCE Ministerial Council agreed by consensus on 2 December that the next OSCE Summit will be held in Istanbul in 1999. The United Kingdom joined the consensus on this decision.

The UK did not make any representations in the Ministerial Council regarding the proposal for Turkey to host the next summit. We believe that holding the summit in Istanbul will draw attention to Turkey's human rights record and help to advance the OSCES's dialogue with Turkey on human rights issues.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Buses

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many passenger injuries per mile travelled occurred within the last year for which figures are available in respect of *(a)* buses with doors and *(b)* buses where access is via an open platform. [62517]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The published data for casualty rates are given per billion passenger kilometre travelled on buses and coaches in Great Britain in 1996. These show the following:

	Per billion passenger kilometres
Killed	0.2
Killed or seriously injured	14
All severities	194

The split between buses and coaches, or between buses with doors and those where access is via an open platform, is not readily available.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the relative popularity of *(a)* buses with doors and *(b)* buses where access is via an open platform; [62518]

(2) what assessment he has made of the implications for *(a)* passenger numbers carried, *(b)* traffic congestion and *(c)* bus journey times of the withdrawal of buses where access is via an open platform. [62519]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department has made no assessment of the popularity of open platform access buses or the implications of their withdrawal. The type of vehicle used is primarily a matter for bus service providers. They will no doubt carry out their own assessment of the various relevant operational and commercial factors, including customer reaction and the types of vehicles currently being manufactured. The Government are committed to public transport being fully accessible, recognising the need for future generations of buses to be usable by disabled people, including those who travel in wheelchairs.

British Rail

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many full-time equivalent staff have been employed by British Rail for each of the last five years. [62520]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from the British Railways Board that the numbers of full-time equivalent staff employed by them for each of the last five financial years were as follows:

Financial year	*Average staff during year*
1993–94	128,414
1994–95	106,748
1995–96	90,165
1996–97	34,868
1997–98	3,319

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the Government's *(a)* total expenditure on and *(b)* income from British Rail in each of the last five years. [62521]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In the last five financial years the Government's total expenditure on the British Railways Board (i. e. BR's external finance requirement—EFR) or otherwise income from the Board (i.e. external financial contribution (EFC)) was the following:

£ million

Year	*EFR/(EFC)*
1993–94	1,461.4
1994–95	(330.1)
1995–96	(768.0)
1996–97	8.6
1997–98	24.8

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the cost per copy of the most recent British Rail annual report; how many copies were produced; and if he will make a statement. [62522]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The British Railways Board's Annual Report and Accounts 1996–97 was published in January 1998. The price per copy was £10. Copies were placed in the House of Commons Library.

I understand from the Board that some 1,600 copies have been distributed, and that they plan to publish their Annual Report and Accounts 1997–98 in January 1999 at a price per copy of £3.00.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the estimated value of assets held by British Rail. [62523]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from the British Railways Board that they had net liabilities of £364 million at 31 March 1998, reflecting assets of £1,133 million and liabilities of £1,497 million.

Railway Services (Frequency)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions under what circumstance it is his policy to seek to renegotiate minimum service levels for train operating companies in respect of service frequencies. [62396]

Ms Glenda Jackson: It is not for Government or the Franchising Director to initiate changes to passenger service requirements (PSRs). The Franchising Director may however agree with an operator to increase service frequencies and amend the PSR accordingly. He has funds available under the Rail Passenger Partnership scheme to support new services and it is for promoters of new services, whether they be operators, local authorities or other parties, to make a business case for any support sought for proposed new services. The Franchising Director would appraise such a business case according to his revised Criteria, which are shortly to be issued and which will reflect the policy set out in our Transport White Paper.

Road Tankers

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library details of the regions in which the different categories of incidents involving road tankers listed in his answer of 21 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *465*, occurred; and if he will make a statement. [62302]

Mr. Meacher: Details of the regions in which the different categories of incidents involving road tankers occurred have been placed in the House Library.

Council of Registered Gas Installers

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what recent consultations he has held with the Council of Registered Gas Installers concerning gas safety; and if he will make a statement. [62400]

Mr. Meacher: My hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Environment, my hon. Friend the Member for Mansfield (Mr. Meale) has recently agreed to meet the Chief Executive of the Council of Registered Gas Installers (CORGI) to discuss CORGI's role in relation to gas safety and their concerns in this area. The meeting will take place as soon as a mutually convenient date can be arranged in the New Year.

CORGI is the body currently approved by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) under the Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998 to operate a register of gas installation businesses. The HSE, for which my Department has responsibility, maintains regular contact with CORGI on gas safety issues.

I am committed to high standards of gas safety for the general public. I want to see everyone with a contribution to make working together to enable the highest safety standards to be achieved and maintained. I therefore welcome the decision by the Health and Safety Commission to ask HSE to carry out a fundamental review of the gas safety regime including CORGI's role within it.

Greenwich Judgment

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will evaluate the impact on *(a)* road traffic and *(b)* air quality of the Greenwich judgment concerning school places. [62860]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have no plans to evaluate the specific impact of the Greenwich judgment on road traffic and air quality, but the School Travel Advisory Group, announced in "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone", may wish to examine the range of factors leading to longer journeys to school.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the changes in standard spending assessment methodology introduced for 1999–2000, showing the effect of each change on *(a)* standard spending assessments for each class of authority and *(b)* standard spending assessments for each local authority in England in (i) percentage and (ii) cash terms. [62855]

Ms Armstrong: The changes in the method of calculating standard spending assessments (SSAs) for 1999–2000 are summarised in paragraph 12 of the consultation paper, "Revenue support grant for 1999–2000 and related matters" issued by the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions on 2 December 1998. A copy was placed in the Library.

For nearly all of these changes, the report of the SSA Sub-group for 1999–2000 exemplified the effect each of these changes would have had on SSAs for 1998–99, had it been introduced in that year. For the new cases in which the Report does not provide the relevant information, it is set out in a paper of the SSA Sub-group (paper SWG:SSASG(98)145). Copies of the Report and the paper have been placed in the Library. The consultation paper gives cross-references to the Report.

Figures are not available to show the equivalent figures in relation to the 1999–2000 SSAs.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out for each notifiable authority the change between revenue support grant in 1998–99 and the provisional rate support grant in 1999–2000 in *(a)* percentage and *(b)* cash terms. [62856]

Ms Armstrong: A table showing the information requested has been placed in the Library. The table also shows the percentage change, and the change in cash terms, between the total of Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and redistributed National Non-Domestic Rates (NNDR)

for 1998–99 and the provisional total of Revenue Support Grant and redistributed National Non-Domestic Rates for 1999–2000.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out for each authority with social services responsibilities the change between the 1998–99 standard spending assessment and their provisional standard spending assessment for 1999–2000 in *(a)* percentage and *(b)* cash terms, excluding from the provisional standard spending assessment the amount provided to cover the 1998–99 STG. [62857]

Ms Armstrong: To adjust in this way does not make sense in the light of the Comprehensive Spending Review which started from a zero base, looking at expenditure needs afresh. The only fair comparison is to look at total resources provided for social services which, in aggregate, show a 6.1 per cent. cash increase or a 3.5 per cent. real terms increase between 1998–99 and 1999–2000. The increased resources we are making available will meet the costs of looking after existing and new community care clients, and enable local authorities to deliver real improvements in services. The figures requested would therefore provide a misleading comparison.

Road Humps

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what evaluation his Department has made of the medical effects of road humps on fragile, elderly and disabled people. [62859]

Ms Glenda Jackson: As part of the continuing research on the design and performance of road humps, the Department has commissioned the Transport Research Laboratory to carry out a literature review on the effects of road humps on professional drivers and people with disabilities. A report on the review is due to be published in March 1999.

In developing published advice for the design of road humps my Department ensured that passenger discomfort was evaluated, and that excessive discomfort would not arise providing the road humps were not driven over at an excessive speed.

Mark 1 Trains

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to receive a report from the Health and Safety Executive on Mark 1 trains. [62580]

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the Health and Safety Executive report into the Mark 1 carriages to be completed and published. [62572]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am expecting the Health and Safety Commission to submit draft regulations shortly on railway safety, including Mark 1 rolling stock.

Coalfields Regeneration

Mr. Kenneth Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much money from the new Coalfields Regeneration Trust Fund will be allocated to projects in the County of Nottinghamshire; and what size of bodies will be able to apply for funding for such projects. [62637]

Mr. Caborn: The Coalfields Regeneration Trust will have the power to assist former and existing coalfields such as those in the County of Nottinghamshire. Legal work is underway to set up the Trust which is expected to be up and running early next year. It will be independent from Government and therefore allocation of resources available to the Trust will be the responsibility of the Trustees.

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if existing coalfield areas will be eligible for assistance and grants from the new Coalfields Regeneration Trust. [62688]

Mr. Caborn: The Coalfields Regeneration Trust will have the power to assist former and existing coalfields that have regeneration requirements. Legal work is underway to set up the Trust which is expected to be up and running early next year. It will be independent from Government and therefore allocation of resources available to the Trust will be the responsibility of the Trustees.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much of the £350 million fund for the coalfield communities in England is new money over and above existing spending programmes; and how much emanates from *(a)* the Coal Miners Pension Fund, *(b)* general Government sources, *(c)* the European Union and *(d)* private or other sources. [62397]

Mr. Caborn: The Government are investing an additional £354 million over three years in regenerating coalfield communities. All that money will come from 'general government sources' including: dedicated allocations from existing spending programmes; an additional £10 million from the Reserve in recognition of the receipt of Government's share of miners' pension funds surpluses, part of which will be available to Scotland and Wales; and £10 million from the Reserve to support the Coalfields Regeneration Trust in complementing the Government's Welfare to Work programme.

A fuller breakdown of this additional investment is set out in the Government's publication 'Making the Difference—a New Start for England's Coalfield Communities; The Government's Response to the Coalfield Task Force Report'. A copy of this publication is available in the House Library.

Housing

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to harmonise the funding of housing and rent rebates paid by *(a)* private landlords and *(b)* local authorities. [62590]

Mr. Raynsford: We hope to issue a consultation paper soon on our proposals to introduce resource accounting into the Housing Revenue Account (HRA). It will seek views on whether rent rebates should be taken out of the HRA and funded in full.

Flats (Access)

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the extension of Part M of the Building Regulations will ensure that all new flats above the entrance level can be reached by a lift. [62632]

Mr. Raynsford: The section in the revised Approved Document for Part M covering passenger lifts and common stairs in blocks of flats explains that the objective is to make reasonable provision for disabled people to visit occupants who live on any storey. The consultation on the proposed amendments recognised that given the added cost of the lift and the additional space needed in common areas, it was not considered reasonable to require a lift to be provided in all instances. However, following the consultation, instead of only controlling the size of lift when there were 12 or more flats above the entrance storey, it was decided that, whenever a lift is provided, it must be suitable for an unaccompanied wheelchair user, irrespective of the number of flats above the entrance storey.

McKinsey Report

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the findings of the McKinsey report, Driving Productivity and Growth in the UK Economy, regarding land use and planning regulations; and if he will make a statement. [62251]

Mr. Raynsford: The McKinsey Report helpfully highlighted the productivity gap which exists between the UK and our competitors.

Last week, my Department published a report, "The Economic Consequences of Planning to the Business Sector", which concluded that businesses see planning as an accepted part of their environment and are looking for improvements but not radical change. We have taken many positive steps through our Modernising Planning initiative to streamline and improve the efficiency of the planning system. We will also be looking in more detail at the issues surrounding one particular part of the business sector, high technology growth industries.

Asbestos

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he has taken to strengthen the enforcement of regulations related to the handling of asbestos; and what future proposals he has in this area. [62497]

Mr. Meacher: I am about to lay amendment regulations before the House which will require more stringent control over exposure to asbestos at work, tightening up the requirements for asbestos licensing and refocusing controls on those most likely to come into contact with asbestos as part of their work, such as maintenance and demolition workers.

The Health and Safety Commission are consulting on proposals for a ban on white asbestos. They will shortly publish guidance on substituting asbestos, and Health and Safety Executive inspectors will enforce the duty on employers to substitute for asbestos where it sis practicable to do so.

I have made clear my view that HSE should give a high enforcement priority to asbestos, and in future greater resources will be devoted to administering and enforcing the new legislation. Already targets for inspection of notified asbestos removal work have been increased.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many prosecutions have been brought and by which agencies for breach of asbestos-related regulations in each of the past 10 years. [62496]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Executive has taken or initiated the following asbestos related prosecutions in each of the last 10 years.

	Informations laid	*Convictions*
1987–88		
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	32	27
Asbestos Regulations 1969	14	8
1988–89		
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	21	21
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	14	13
Asbestos Regulations 1969	4	3
1989–90		
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	52	47
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	14	7
Asbestos (Prohibitions) Amendments Regulation 1988	1	0
1990–91		
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	57	48
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	7	7
1991–92		
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	47	39
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	8	7
1992–93		
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	24	23
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	3	3
1993–94		
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	31	20
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	5	5
1994–95	37	29
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	7	6
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983		

	Informations laid	Convictions
1995–96		
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	51	33
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	13	11
1996–97		
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	37	31
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	5	4
1997–98[1]		
The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 1987	42	38
Asbestos (Licensing) Regulations 1983	3	3

[1] Provisional

Notes:

1. From 1996–97 data includes proceedings instituted by HSE's FOD, CHID (excluding explosives and pipelines) and NSD (conventional safety only).
2. The information HSE has from Local Authorities on proceedings they have taken under legislation for which HSE is responsible does not separately identify the asbestos-related prosecutions.

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what action he takes to monitor the level of fines or other sanctions in asbestos-related court cases; and if he will make a statement. [62498]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Commission (HSC) keeps me informed of the level of penalties imposed for health and safety offences. The general level of penalties imposed for these crimes, including those related to asbestos, does not in my view or that of the HSC match their seriousness. However, I welcome the demonstration in a recent case related to asbestos removal in Birmingham that the courts are willing to imprison individuals who have committed serious health and safety offences. I also welcome the Court of Appeal judgment on 6 November which said that health and safety fines are too low. I hope this judgment will help the courts reflect the full gravity of such offences when they decide future sentences.

Pesticide Tax

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies he has carried out into the impact on (i) competitiveness and (ii) UK employment of a pesticide tax. [62614]

Mr. Meacher: The Department has commissioned extensive research work on the feasibility of an economic instrument to assist in delivering the Government's pesticide minimisation policy. This has included assessments of the effects of such an instrument on the competitiveness of pesticide manufacturers and distributors and of relevant agricultural sectors as well as the potential impacts on employment in these sectors.

Health and Safety Commission

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what level of resources will be provided to the Health and Safety Commission over the next three years. [63088]

Mr. Meacher: I am pleased to be able to announce today a new financial package for the health and Safety Commission. Extra Government funding of £20 million over the next three years, together with changes in its charging regime, will enable the HSC to increase its running costs by £12.9 million in 1999–00, £22.8 million in 2000–01 and £27.0 million in 2001–02 over and above the baseline for the current financial year. This settlement signals our strong commitment to achieving further improvements in health and safety standards in the workplace. We will be agreeing a Plan of Work with the Commission which will ensure that these additional resources deliver real and tangible benefit.

This excellent settlement for health and safety is dependent in part on an extension to the Commission's existing charging regime. I have asked the Commission to introduce charges in statutory permissioning regimes for assessing safety cases, granting approvals and regulatory activities to ensure compliance with the safety case in the gas, offshore and railway industries, and the functions placed upon the GB competent authorities under the BU Directive for Control of Major Accident Hazards in onshore installations. The Government do not intend that charging should extend beyond regimes of this kind. I believe it is right that these industries, which depend so heavily on safe operation, should pay for these activities and that the resultant income should be reinvested to secure further improvement in health and safety standards.

Integrated Transport White Paper

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will consult on his proposals for road user charging schemes and the workplace parking levy, as set out in the White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone". [63025]

Mr. Prescott: I will issue a consultation document on road user and workplace parking charges on Tuesday 8 December. It will set out the Government's detailed proposals for the legislative framework which will allow local authorities to introduce charging schemes. It will also raise a number of detailed issues on the implementation of such schemes on which we are seeking the views of all interested parties. Copies of the document will be available in the Vote Office and the Library of the House.

Leaded Petrol

Mr. Gareth R. Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what information is being provided to owners of older vehicles that will be affected by the withdrawal of leaded petrol from sale from 1 January 2000. [62962]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The withdrawal of leaded petrol is part of a European strategy to reduce pollution from road traffic and the air we breathe.

I am nevertheless aware of the concerns of many owners of older vehicles about the practical implications of the ban and information is being made available, at outlets such as MOT stations, garages and forecourts and other locations, which will address the sorts of questions

which motorists have been raising. Information may also be found on the Department's website at http://www.detr.gov.uk.

The general message for those who use leaded petrol is that they will have several options available to ensure that they can continue to use their car after 1 January 2000.

Water Discharge Consents

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many water discharge consents are currently in place; and what percentage of these were *(a)* reviewed and *(b)* contravened in 1997. [60870]

Mr. Meacher: The most recent figures available on discharge consents were reported in the Environment Agency's Annual Report and Accounts, and relate to the fiscal year 1997–98. There were 79,692 discharge consents in place at year end, including 4,267 which were issued during the year. A total of 4,093 discharge consents were reviewed—5.4 per cent. of the 75,425 in place at the beginning of the year.

As the then Parliamentary Under-Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Angela Eagle) said in her answer to the hon. Member for Lewes (Mr. Baker), on 15 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *37*, the number of discharges which exceeded their consented limits during the calendar year 1997 was 4,717.

Water Companies

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the total profits of privatised water companies since 1990 and *(b)* the total investment in environmental improvements over the same period. [61805]

Mr. Meacher: The information is as follows:

(a) The aggregate profits before tax of the water undertakers, both the privatised water and sewerage companies and the private sector water supply companies, over the years 1990–91 to 1997–98 were about £14 billion at 1997–98 prices.

(b) Total capital investment by the water undertakers in the same period was about £26 billion, of which about £7 billion was invested by the privatised water and sewerage companies in environmental improvements, both at 1997–98 prices.

Transport Infrastructure Spending

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide a breakdown of transport infrastructure spending on *(a)* pavements, *(b)* cyclepaths, *(c)* roads, *(d)* the Underground, *(e)* buses, *(f)* railways and *(g)* River Thames quays and riverbuses, in London in each of the last five years. [61662]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The following table gives a breakdown of central Government support for items *(b)* to *(e)* and Port of London Authority expenditure on *(g)* in the last five years. The London authorities and developers also provide additional funding for items *(b)*, *(c)* and *(e)*. Information on this additional funding and on *(a)* and *(f)* is not held centrally. The figures for *(c)* exclude the Highways Agency allocations as they were not fully founded until 1994, and they keep their records on a national basis. I will write to the hon. Member separately on that matter.

£ million

	(b)	*(c)*	*(d)*	*(e)*	*(f)*
	Cyclepaths[1]	*Roads*[2]	*Underground*[3]	*Buses*[4]	*River Thames Piers*[5]
1993–94	—	98	786	28	1.0
1994–95	—	76	929	16	0.2
1995–96	3	69	1,087	17	0.1
1996–97	4	57	1,034	23	0.2
1997–98	4	51	800	37	3.3
Total	11	353	4,636	122	4.8

[1] Transport Policies and Programmes (TPP) allocations for the London Cycle Network.

[2] TPP allocations for principal road maintenance and major schemes and Traffic Director for London annual spends, but excludes the Highways Agency funding of trunk roads.

[3] London Underground investment.

[4] London Transport Bus investment and TPP allocations for the London Bus Priority Network. These figures do not fully reflect the overall investment in buses given that since privatisation in 1994 the purchase of new buses has been a matter for the private bus operating companies and the road infrastructure funding at *(c)* directly assists the movements of buses.

[5] Port of London Authority expenditure by calender year (e.g. first entry is for calender year 1994) on Thames Piers (Quays). The 1998 figure is forecast expenditure. There has been no central Government support on river buses in the last five years.

Low-emission Fuels

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to increase the availability of *(a)* city diesel and *(b)* other low-emission fuels. [61801]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are aware of the environmental benefits of cleaner fuels and have focused on using fiscal incentives to encourage their wider use and availability.

Ultra low sulphur diesel currently enjoys a 2 pence per litre duty differential compared with standard diesel. In the Pre-Budget Report the Chancellor reaffirmed his intention to increase this to 3 pence per litre at the next Budget. In little over a year since such incentives were first introduced, sales have increased to account now for some 17.5% of total diesel supplied.

The duty on liquid petroleum gas and compressed natural gas at 21.13 pence per kilogramme (approximately 2 litres) is significantly lower in relative terms than the duty on standard diesel at 44.79 pence for one litre. The Government are committed to at least maintaining the 1997 duty differential between road fuel gases and standard diesel.

Through the Cleaner Vehicles Task Force, Government is working with industry to consider the mechanisms for developing improved infrastructure to make cleaner fuels more widely available.

Councillors

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will identify the places in the studies by Ken Young and Nirmala Rao, "Coming to Terms with Change?" The Local government Councillor, in 1993 and the Audit Commission's publication "Representing the People—the

Role of Councillors", which indicate that councillors wish to spend more time in direct contact with those they represent. [62037]

Mr. Raynsford: Pages 21–23 (including tables 3.5 and 3.6) in the study by Ken Young and Nirmala Rao—"Coming to Terms with Change? The Local Government Councillor", in 1993 show that many councillors, particularly those under 55 years old, felt they gave too little time to consulting with the public in meetings and dealing with electors' problems. Page 3 of the Audit Commission management paper—"Representing the People—The Role of Councillors" states that too much burden is placed on councillors, often unproductively, by committee meetings even though councillors believe that they should fulfil a wider representational role. This is demonstrated in Box 1 on page 8 of this report which quotes Young and Rao's finding that there was a "radical mismatch between what councillors aspire to do and what the pressures of council business require them to do".

Research Papers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many series of research papers his Department produces; and what are the names of each of these series. [62046]

Mr. Raynsford: Information about the Department's research is made available in many forms including short summaries of completed, current and future research. Details are available through Newsletters and the Department's Website. Series of research papers are uncommon although there is a recent example in the 'Road Safety Research Series—No. 1 Road Safety Education of Children'. Conclusions of research inform Departmental advice which is disseminated through regular Circulars or Advice Notes. Many research contractors maintain their own series of research papers. The Transport Research Laboratory, Building Research Establishment, the Hadley Centre and University of Westminster are examples.

Rental Deposits

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress the Government are making on helping to establish a voluntary scheme run by landlords and agents to cover rental deposits; and if he will make a statement. [62298]

Mr. Raynsford: My hon. Friend, the Minister for Local Government and Housing, announced on 12 October that she will meet organisations representing landlords and tenants to invite them to set up a voluntary scheme to administer tenants' deposits. My officials have been holding a series of initial meetings with representative organisations to discuss with them the contribution they might make in helping to develop a scheme. The meeting with Ministers will be held early in the new year.

Pacific Crane Incident

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received concerning the 24 October incident involving the Pacific Crane vessel in the Irish sea; what assessment he has made of the environmental issues raised; what correspondence he or his Department have exchanged and meetings he or his Department have had with British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. since the incident; and if he will make a statement. [62270]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is as follows:

(i) I have received two representations from the hon. Member for South Devon (Mr. McGrady). Officials have received one representation from the Irish Government.

(ii) The Pacific Crane has been laid up in the Anchor Line Basin in Barrow Docks for approximately the last two years. The vessel was securely moored when the accommodation barge, the Bibby Renaissance, broke free from her mooring nearby and collided into her. The Pacific Crane was not in transit to a destination and had neither cargo or crew on board the vessel at the time of the incident. The Bibby Renaissance was also empty of cargo. There was no threat of pollution. An assessment into environmental damage was therefore not considered necessary.

(iii) On 26 October 1998 the Marine Accident Investigation Branch received a letter from James Fisher and Sons, managing agents of the Pacific Crane, confirming details of the incident. On 28 October 1998 a copy of the press release issued by British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. was forwarded to officials of my Department for information.

(iv) No meetings have taken place between representatives of my Department and British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. The Marine Accident Investigation Branch is carrying out an Administrative Inquiry into the incident and is in correspondence with the owners of both vessels.

Eurostar

Mr. Snape: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies his Department has undertaken on the environmental effects of operating Eurostar trains on the North London line between Stratford and the link to St. Pancras. [62106]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None because the Channel Tunnel Rail Link has been planned and approved on the basis of two new tracks from the Channel Tunnel to the London terminus, St Pancras. The environmental effects of widening the North London line, rather than using the existing tracks, were assessed by Union Railways between 1992 and 1994 before adoption of the route now authorised under the Channel Tunnel Rail Link Act 1996.

Concessionary Fares

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions by what means he plans to establish a national minimum concessionary fares scheme in 1999. [62311]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The national minimum concessionary fare scheme outlined in our White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport", will require primary legislation. Implementation will therefore depend on the availability of Parliamentary time.

Sellafield

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish in the *Official Report* the text of the letter sent to the hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent in response to the question on representations on Sellafield of 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *835*. [62484]

Mr. Meacher: A copy of the letter which I sent to my hon. Friend is attached.

Letter from the Minister for the Environment to Mr. Llew Smith, dated 3 December 1998:

In answer to your recent parliamentary question, I promised to write to you with the information about the representations we had received on the Sellafield applications.

As you know in reply to Joan Walley's PQ we reported that 4 letters relating to the Sellafield MOX plant and 2 letters relating to the variations to BNFL's site discharge authorisations in response to the Environment Agency's statement on 23 October were received. However, one of the letters which was primarily about the MOX plant also made reference to the discharge authorisations and therefore the number of representations concerning the discharge authorisations figure should have been reported as 3 rather than 2.

The 4 letters referring to the MOX plant were received from an overseas government minister, an MP, a non-government organisation and a member of the public; all of which were opposed to the recommendations. The 3 letters referring to the variations to BNFL's site discharge authorisations were received from an overseas government minister, an MP and a non-government organisation; all of which were opposed to the recommendations.

You also asked to know what representations were received in the two months prior to the release of the Environment Agency documents. The number of letters received relating to the MOX plant were 3 and relating to the variations to BNFL's site discharge authorisations were 14. You may also wish to know that the 3 letters relating to the MOX plant were received from a non-government organisations and two members of the public. The 14 letters relating to the variations were received from members of parliament.

I am copying this letter to Joan Walley with apologies for our error and a copy will also be placed in the Library of the House.

Air Pollution

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to extend the inspection regime for small and intermediate factories where responsibility for industrial emissions and air quality standards lies with local authorities. [62536]

Mr. Meacher: None. My Department did, however, publish an action plan this October jointly with the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health, the Local Government Association and others, which includes actions to improve local authority inspection practice for processes regulated under the existing Local Air Pollution Control regime.

Hazardous Substances

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what controls he envisages to give effect to the land use planning requirements of the COMAH Directive; and if he will make a statement. [62586]

Mr. Caborn: The Government have today issued draft Regulations to implement the land use requirements of Directive 96/82/EC on the Control of Major Accident Hazards.

Amendments are to be made to the Planning Hazardous Substances consents procedures to implement these provisions of the Directive whilst maintaining existing health and safety standards where these differ from the Directive. Changes to the Development Plan Regulations will ensure that local planning authorities take account of the requirements of the Directive when drawing up their development plans.

Non-domestic Rates

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will set out the basis of his calculations of the distributable amount of non-domestic rates for 1999–2000. [62589]

Ms Armstrong: The distributable amount of non-domestic rates in England for 1999–2000 will be £13,612 million. This is based on a non-domestic rate poundage (multiplier) of 48.9p and includes an allowance of £310 million for an Exchequer payment to the non-domestic rates pool, to compensate for the shortfall which would otherwise occur as a result of the regulations under section 58 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 to phase in the effects of the 1995 revaluation on rate bills.

The calculation for 1999–2000, and the prior-year figures on which this is based, are set out in the table:

National non-domestic rates—calculation of distributable amount

£ million

	1996–97 Final outturn	*1997–98 Provisional outturn*	*1998–99 Provisional outturn*	*1999–2000 Estimated in-year contribution*
1. Income from Local Lists				
Multiplier (p)	44.9	45.8	47.4	48.9
Gross Rate Yield	13,370	13,481	13,767	13,914
(i) Reliefs				
(a) Net Transitional Relief	−545	−430	−560	−570
(b) Empty properties	−1,018	−928	−999	−1,031
(c) Charitable	−482	−495	−508	−524
(d) Discretionary	−74	−49	−33	−35
Net Yield after reliefs	11,252	11,579	11,667	11,754
(ii) Collection Costs/Reductions to Contributions				
(a) Costs of collection	−77	−78	−79	−83
(b) Losses on collection	−139	−115	−167	−141
(c) City of London offset	−7	−7	−7	−7
Total contribution in respect of year	11,029	11,379	11,415	11,524
(iii) Adjustments				
Repayments/interest payments	−370	−210	−546	−619

National non-domestic rates—calculation of distributable amount

£ million

	1996–97 Final outturn	*1997–98 Provisional outturn*	*1998–99 Provisional outturn*	*1999–2000 Estimated in-year contribution*
Total adjustments	–370	–210	–546	–619
Net Local Yield	10,659	11,169	10,869	10,905
2. Income from Central List				
Net Central List Yield	1,221	1,207	1,265	1,303
3. Income from Crown Contributions in Aid				
Net Crown Yield	487	469	445	460
Total NDR Yield	12,366	12,846	12,579	12,668
4. Exchequer Contributions				
Total Exchequer contributions	429	400	360	310
Total NNDR pool payments (1+2+3+4)	12,795	13,246	12,939	12,978
5. Adjustments				
Surplus brought forward	–1,059	–1,000	218	634
Combined total	11,736	12,245	13,157	13,612
Distributable amount	12,736	12,027	12,524	13,612
Surplus carried forward	–1,000	218	634	0

Notes:

The amounts shown are those recorded in the post end-year (NNDR3) returns. For 1998–99 the amounts shown are the estimated outturn for the year based mainly upon authorities' provisional contributions to the non-domestic rating pool.

1. Item 1: The gross calculated rate yield represents the total value of non-domestic hereditaments on local rating lists times the multiplier.
2. Item 1(i)(a): The Transitional decrease adjustment includes the estimated amount of rates that will not be recouped from local list ratepayers under the transitional arrangements made by regulations under section 58 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988.
3. Item 1(i)(b): The empty property relief adjustments include voids and partially occupied hereditaments. The 1999–2000 figure includes an allowance for the increase in the gross rates yield.
4. Item 1(i)(c): Charitable rate relief. Figures for 1998–99 onwards include mandatory relief for village shops under the Local Government and Rating Act 1997. The 1999–2000 figure includes an allowance for the increase in the gross rates yield.
5. Item 1(i)(d): Discretionary relief granted to charities, non-profit making organisations and for other reasons including, for 1998–99 onwards, discretionary relief for village shops under the Local Government and Rating Act 1997. The 1999–2000 figure includes an allowance for the increase in the gross rates yield.
6. Item 1(ii)(a) and (b): The allowances for the costs and losses incurred by authorities in collecting non-domestic rates from ratepayers.
7. Item 1(ii)(c): City Offset—the amount which the City of London will not be required to pay into the non-domestic rating pool. It is the amount which will be retained by the City to meet its own expenditure.
8. Item 1(iii): net adjustment in respect of appeals and other amendments to the rating list affecting liability for previous years rates settled in that year.
9. Item 2: the rateable value of non-domestic hereditaments on the central rating list times the multiplier, less the net effect of transitional arrangements, and adjusted for appeals and other changes in respect of previous years.
10. Item 3: the 1999–2000 figure for Crown properties includes an allowance for the effect of transitional arrangements.
11. Item 4: the contribution from central government to offset the amount of the Secretary of State's estimate of income forgone as a result of transitional arrangements established by regulations under section 58 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

Minimum Wage

36. **Mr. Lansley:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if the stipends of any clergy are to be increased in consequence of the implementation of the minimum wage. [61377]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The stipends of parochial clergy are increased each year by dioceses on the basis of recommendations from the Central Stipends Authority. Clergy are not covered by the provisions of the National Minimum Wage Act 1998, as Ministers of religion have the legal status of office holders, not employees.

Constitution

37. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what changes will be made to the Commissioners' constitution from 1 January 1999; and if he will make a statement. [61378]

Mr. Stuart Bell: Under the National Institutions Measure, which received Royal Assent in July this year, the number of Commissioners will be reduced from 95 to 33. The Commissioners' membership will continue to reflect the Commissioners' joint accountability to Church and State.

38. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, if the links between the Commissioners and Parliament will continue under the Commissioners' new constitution. [61379]

Mr. Stuart Bell: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I have just given to my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr. Bradshaw). I can assure the House that the close links between the Commissioners and Parliament will continue under the Commissioners' new constitution, through my own role and that of the six State office holders who will be Commissioners from 1 January 1999.

The Commissioners' membership will reflect the Commissioners' dual accountability to Church and Parliament. The Commissioners will continue to answer questions in the House of Commons and to lay their Annual Report and Accounts before Parliament.

Pension Fund

39. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what effect the removal of payable tax credits has had on the long-term returns of the Church's pension fund. [61380]

Mr. Stuart Bell: At their 1997 dividend levels, the Commissioners estimate that the removal of payable tax credits will ultimately reduce their income and their total investment returns by £12m annually. This loss of return relates to the whole of the Church Commissioners' investments as they do not designate a separate pension fund within the overall fund. It will also reduce returns on the newly established contributory pensions scheme, which meets pension liabilities for service from 1998 onwards, which is administered by the Church of England Pensions Board.

Churchwardens Measure

40. **Mr. Rowe:** To ask the hon. Member for Middlesbrough, representing the Church Commissioners, what representations he has received concerning the financial implications of the Churchwardens Measure; and if he will make a statement. [61381]

Mr. Stuart Bell: The Church Commissioners have received no such representations, although I am aware that hon. Members have received representations on other aspects of the Measure. All such matters will no doubt be discussed when the Ecclesiastical Committee takes evidence on the Measure from General Synod witnesses on 15 December.

DEFENCE

Ex-service Personnel

4. **Mr. Heppell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proposals his Department has to assist ex-service men and women return to civilian life. [61340]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We provide a wide range of support to help Service personnel return to civilian life.

On 5 October, I opened a veterans Advice Unit to help guide ex-Service personnel around the maze of help available to them. Details of the Unit are in a booklet, copies of which have been placed in the Library and Vote Office.

Territorial Army

13. **Mr. Woodward:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the impact of the Government's proposals in respect of the TA in *(a)* Oxfordshire and *(b)* the Witney constituency. [61351]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Following the recent restructuring exercise, Territorial Army units to be located in Oxford will be as follows: a surgical squadron of 202 Field Hospital, the Home Counties Band and the Regimental Headquarters and Headquarters Squadron of the Radio Regiment. A squadron of Royal Signallers will also remain at Banbury. In the Witney constituency, 218 Field Squadron at Brize Norton will disband.

16. **Mr. Greenway:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the proposed timetable for relocation of the Army Medical Services TA and the Medical Field Training Centre to York and Strensall. [61356]

Mr. Doug Henderson: On current plans, the Headquarters Army Medical Services (TA) will move to Imphal Barracks, York in February 1999 and the Army Medical Services Field Training Centre will move to Strensall in April 1999.

20. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to reprovide training centres for cadets. [61360]

Mr. Doug Henderson: As we have already announced, any cadet unit that has facilities in the TA Centre that is closing as part of the restructuring of the TA will be reprovided with suitable accommodation and support. We have earmarked £12 million to achieve this. No TA centre which houses cadet units or cadet training facilities will be closed until alternative arrangements have been made for the cadets.

23. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations he has received on recruitment to the Territorial Army. [61363]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Before final decisions on the future structure and distribution of the Territorial Army were taken and announced, a number of hon. Members and members of the public wrote to me about the TA presence in their constituency, including the matter of recruitment to the TA. Furthermore, representations about recruitment to the TA were made during the consultative process with the TA and the Territorial Auxiliary and Volunteer Reserve Associations (TAVRAs).

Mr. Flight: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps he is taking to address the needs of the Territorial Army following his recent announcement. [61355]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The needs of the Territorial Army are being addressed through its modernisation and reorganisation announced by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence on 17 November 1998. Details of the reorganisation can be found in the document "Modern Forces for a Modern World: A Territorial Army for the Future", copies of which have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the costs of transferring the 101 REME (V) Battalion Headquarters from Chorley to Queensferry. [62611]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Land Command is still consulting with the Territorial Auxiliary and Reserve Associations over the transfer of 101 REME (Volunteer) Battalion from Chorley to Queensferry. No final costs are therefore available at this time, although they are not expected to be significant.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the costs of the operation of the 101 REME (V) Battalion Headquarters were in 1996, 1997 and 1998. [62610]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Operating costs for 101 REME (Volunteer) Battalion Headquarters for the last three years were as follows:

1996–97: £723,000

1997–98: £786,000

1998–99: £818,000.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if he will estimate the costs of the first year of operation of the 101 REME (V) Battalion Headquarters in Queensferry; [62609]

(2) if he will make a statement on the financial saving made from operating the Headquarters of the 101 REME (V) Battalion Headquarters in Queensferry instead of Chorley. [62613]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No detailed estimate can be made of the financial savings which will arise as a result of operating HQ 101 (Volunteer) Battalion REME from Queensferry instead of Chorley until full details of the support costs for the unit in its new location have been established. We expect that there will be savings because HQ 101 (Volunteer) Battalion REME will share the Queensferry TA Centre with other units instead of being the sole occupant of the Centre, as it was in Chorley.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which body is responsible for ensuring the value for money of public funds spent on the Territorial Army. [62502]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Expenditure on the Territorial Army falls largely to the budget of the Commander in Chief Land Command, to whom the responsibility is delegated for ensuring value for money in meeting agreed tasks.

Defence Establishment, Shoeburyness

15. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of the defence establishment in Shoeburyness. [61354]

Mr. Spellar: The future of the defence establishments in Shoeburyness is as I told the hon. Member last month: Horseshoe Barracks, Old Ranges and Gunners Park are being prepared for disposal and redevelopment and we are seeking opportunities to increase the exploitation of the New Ranges for non-defence purposes.

Human Rights

17. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his policy on use of the armed services to assist in defending and upholding human rights overseas. [61357]

Mr. George Robertson: Human rights are at the heart of the United Kingdom's foreign policy. The Armed Forces have the support of foreign policy as one of their main objectives, particularly in promoting international peace and security. Among the means which we use to achieve this objective are activities under the new Defence Diplomacy Mission, which help to dispel hostility, maintain trust and assist in the development of democratically accountable armed forces. British forces also contribute to defending and upholding human rights through their involvement in a wide range of conflict prevention, peace support and humanitarian operations.

Strategic Defence Review

21. **Mr. Keith Simpson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how he intends funding the organisational changes, recruitment of personnel, welfare support and purchase of new equipment for the Regular and Reserve Army as outlined in the strategic defence review. [61361]

Mr. George Robertson: The plans outlined in the Strategic Defence Review will be funded from savings generated within the review, as set out in chapter 10 of the White Paper (Cmd 3999), a copy of which is in the Library.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Strategic Defence Review's objective of making financial savings in the Defence Budget. [62612]

Mr. George Robertson: The Strategic Defence Review was policy led and had no objective to make financial savings in the Defence Budget. The plans set out in the Strategic Defence Review White Paper require substantial investment to improve inherited areas of weakness and to fund a continuing major equipment programme. The resources needed will come from savings generated from rationalisation in the support area, an increased efficiency programme and smarter procurement.

Mr. Soames: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what changes are planned to public duties following the strategic defence review. [61337]

Mr. George Robertson: Armed Forces personnel will continue to play an important role in State Ceremonial occasions and a range of Public Duties. The Strategic Defence Review has had no effect on our commitment to these duties.

Strategic Lift Capability

22. **Mr. Paul Clark:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on Britain's strategic lift capability. [61362]

Mr. Spellar: The Strategic Defence Review concluded that we need to improve our strategic transport capability, to allow us to move more powerful forces quickly to an overseas location. We are planning to do this through acquiring four additional roll-on/roll-off container ships and, in the short term, four large C-17 aircraft or their equivalent. In the longer term, we are considering a replacement for our remaining elderly transport aircraft, for which the European Future Large Aircraft is a contender.

Defence Attachés

24. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many new defence attaché liaison and exchange posts he intends to create. [61364]

Mr. George Robertson: We are currently reviewing the world-wide distribution of attachés in conjunction with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. I shall write to my hon. Friend once the results of the review are available.

Service Museums and Archives

25. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of service museums and archives. [61366]

Mr. Spellar: My Department will continue to provide grant-in-aid funding in support of the six Principal Service Museums and their collections. In addition, funding will continue to be made available to the 69 Regimental and Corps museums which currently receive financial assistance.

Parachute Regiment

26. **Mr. Gerald Howarth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the role of the Parachute Regiment. [61367]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Parachute Regiment provides a unique airborne capability. At present it comprises three Regular battalions and two Territorial Army battalions.

The Strategic Defence Review concludes that, in the future, one Parachute battalion group would be required at very high readiness as part of the first echelon of the Joint Rapid Reaction Forces. Two of the three regular Parachute Regiment battalions will form an integral part of the Army's new 16 Air Assault Brigade and will take it in turns to deliver this parachute capability.

The third Regular Parachute Regiment battalion will not be used in a parachute role, but instead will be used for other infantry tasks.

As part of the restructuring of the Territorial Army announced by my right hon. Friend on 17 November, the Parachute Regiment will retain one Territorial Army battalion, which will be nationally recruited.

Equal Opportunities Training Centre, Shrivenham

27. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the role and objectives of the proposed Tri-Service Equal Opportunities Training Centre at Shrivenham. [61368]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I officially opened the Tri-Service Equal Opportunities Training Centre, co-located with the Royal Military College of Science at Shrivenham, on 25 September 1998. The Centre has been established to deliver equal opportunities training to Service and civilian personnel holding the appointment of Equal Opportunities Advisers and selected military trainers throughout the Service command chain. It also provides, with the assistance of an outside contractor, mandatory awareness seminars for senior Service officers and MOD Senior Civil Servants.

The work of the Centre complements the wide range of equal opportunities training and initiatives already instigated by the MOD and the three Services. It has a vital role to play in the Armed Forces' drive to eradicate unacceptable behaviour and to explain both organisational and individual responsibilities. It encourages a top down—bottom up approach to equal opportunities awareness. This approach ensures that the specific work and initiatives employed by EO advisers are supported at the highest level by senior officers providing positive, informed leadership.

Peacekeeping Missions (Training)

28. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what training is given to members of the armed forces specific to their role in peacekeeping missions. [61369]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The training for members of the Army prior to deployment on a Peace Support Operation is tailored to the specific nature and requirements of the operation in question. In addition, a short Peace Support Operations unit is included within the syllabus of the Joint Service Command and Staff Course at the tri-Service staff college in Bracknell.

Staff College, Camberley

30. **Mr. Hawkins:** To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future use of the buildings of Staff College, Camberley. [61371]

Mr. Spellar: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given to him by my hon. Friend the then Minister of State for the Armed Forces on 16 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *237–38*.

Falkland Islands

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will reassess the military justification for garrisoning the Falklands at current levels. [61358]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Strategic Defence Review confirmed the Government's commitment to ensure the security of our Overseas Territories, including the Falkland Islands. It concluded that there is at present no requirement to alter the size of the Garrison on the Falkland Islands. We continue, however, to keep force levels under review.

Accounting Officers

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence who is the accounting officer of each of the armed forces. [62501]

Mr. George Robertson: Parliament requires that the format of published Supply Estimates should reflect the way in which a Department manages its expenditure—thus accountability for MOD expenditure is currently aligned with the budgetary system, rather than with individual Services, as follows:

Vote 1 (covering operational and support costs): the Permanent Under-Secretary of State;

Vote 2 (covering logistics services): the Chief of Defence Procurement;

Vote 3 (covering defence systems procurement and research): the Chief of Defence Procurement;

Vote 4 (covering armed forces retired pay and pensions): the Permanent Under-Secretary of State.

Further detail on Defence (Class I) Votes is published on pages 24 to 35 of Supply Estimates 1998–99 (HC-635 of April 1998), a copy of which is available in the Library.

Defence Diplomacy Initiative

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what extra money he will spend in each of the next three years on *(a)* additional military attaché posts, *(b)* enhanced arms control programmes, *(c)* enhanced outreach programmes and *(d)* military assistance programmes; [62078]

(2) by how much he will increase over the next three years *(a)* the Defence Military Assistance Fund and *(b)* resources dedicated to defence diplomacy; [62056]

(3) how many defence diplomacy scholarships he will introduce for overseas students; at what cost; and at which institutions; [62076]

(4) when he will launch the defence diplomacy post-doctoral research fellowship; how much it will cost; and which British university will be the joint sponsor; [62077]

(5) how many additional military special adviser posts *(a)* have been created since 1 May 1997 and *(b)* will be created in each of the next three years; and what is the location of these posts; [62073]

(6) how he will make greater use of short-term training teams; [62074]

(7) what additional courses he is planning for overseas military personnel. [62075]

Mr. George Robertson: As part of our Defence Diplomacy initiative, we intend to increase the Defence Military Assistance Fund by around £5 million in 1999–2000, and by up to £15 million per annum in the two subsequent years. Most of these additional resources will be used for Defence Diplomacy-related activities, including to fund attaché posts, and enhanced arms control, outreach and wider military assistance programmes.

In particular, the initiative has placed new emphasis on the provision of high-quality training and education in Britain for overseas students, for which we already have an excellent reputation. We are therefore launching a dedicated Defence Diplomacy Scholarship Scheme, with the aim of introducing selected overseas officers and officials to the principles of Defence Diplomacy. We are currently considering how best to organise this scheme, including funding arrangements and options for the location of the training. We will then be able to determine the exact number of scholarships we can offer and to whom. In parallel, we are sponsoring a Defence Diplomacy Research Fellowship to help develop a greater understanding of the requirements of the Defence Diplomacy Mission and to enable us better to judge the impact of the specific activities we undertake. I expect to be able to make formal announcements on the details of the Scholarship Scheme and the Research Fellowship in the near future.

Eight Adviser posts have been established with the Defence Ministries and Armed Forces of Central and Eastern European States since 1 May 1997: three are in Romania, two in Lithuania and one each with the NATO de-mining mission in Albania, the Baltic States Battalion and the Baltic States Squadron. Two advisers were sent to the Ukraine in the past 12 months, but these posts were of a specifically short duration and have ceased to exist. On current plans, a civilian planning and finance adviser will take up post with the Hungarian Ministry of Defence in January 1999 and an officer is to join the Staff of the Baltic Defence College. We are also actively pursuing a Slovenian request for an adviser to be attached for six months early next year. We have also offered to provide Advisers for most central and eastern European countries.

Short-Term Training Teams provide a cost-effective way of training overseas military personnel. The creation of the new Defence Diplomacy mission and the allocation of the additional resources to this area that I have announced will enable us to make increased use of such teams. In particular, we will look to use them to assist with the development of the skills and structures needed by modern democratically accountable armed forces, building upon the valuable work of this kind which such teams have carried out in the past in central and eastern Europe and elsewhere.

In addition, approximately 4,000 military personnel from over 100 countries receive training at UK defence establishments each year. We are also considering how to expand on this part of our Defence Diplomacy effort.

South Coast Defence Trials

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the report of the review of the south coast defence trials between 1964 and 1977 by Professor Brian Spratt will be made publicly available on completion. [62042]

Mr. Doug Henderson: It is expected that Professor Spratt's report of his review of the south coast defence trials will be completed early in 1999. It will be made publicly available when completed.

Veterans' Advice Unit

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the activities of the Veterans' Advice Unit since it was set up. [62125]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Ministry of Defence Veterans' Advice Unit is a telephone advice line—telephone number 08456 02 03 02, charging callers at local rates which is listed in all telephone directories under "Ministry of Defence Veterans' Advice Unit".

The primary purpose of the Unit is to provide a telephone focal point for the UK's estimated 15 million ex-Service men and women and their dependants, acting as a signpost to advise callers where, when, and how best to obtain expert help on issues of concern to them. It aims to maximise the impact of current health care, social and welfare services provided by Government Departments, Agencies and non-governmental organisations.

The Unit is staffed by serving Warrant Officers specifically chosen for their ability to communicate across all sections of Service background and for their extensive

and wide range of experience. They have been specifically trained in telephone communication skills and have served attachments to TRBL's Legionline and the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Families Association's Forces Help inquiry line to learn at first hand from their experience in this field.

Since I opened it on 5 October, the Unit has taken about 1,500 calls and the rate of calls has risen over time as awareness of the Unit's existence becomes more widespread. Most calls can be dealt with immediately, but some require investigative work and a subsequent call back to the inquirer.

The range of problems dealt with has been diverse, including Home care and Housing, Falklands and Gulf War issues, Finance, the Tracing of Relatives, War Graves and Historical records, among others. However, the largest number of calls have concerned Pensions, Employment, the Provision of Medals and information about the Unit itself.

Since the launch, some 90,000 leaflets publicising the Unit have been distributed through Resettlement Offices, The Confederation of British Service and Ex-Service Organisations (COBSEO), The Royal British Legion, SSAFA-Forces Help and other veterans' organisations and charities including the British Limbless Ex-Service Men's Association (BLESMA), the Ex-Services Mental Welfare Society (Combat Stress) and the Regular Forces Employment Association, among others. Copies of the leaflet have also been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

The leaflet has been, or is being, sent to DSS Benefit Offices nationwide, the War Pensions Agency and Citizens Advice Bureaux. The MOD is continuing to look for ways in which the Unit can be publicised, including, for example, the possibility of displaying leaflets in Post Offices. The military media, such as *Navy News*, *Soldier* magazine, *RAF News* and the British Forces Broadcasting Service have carried items about the Unit.

Military Satellites

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what progress has been made since 16 December 1997 in respect of a joint French, German and United Kingdom commitment to a new generation of military satellites. [62279]

Mr. Spellar: The UK considered a range of procurement options, including collaborative, national conventional and national Public Finance Initiative (PFI) solutions to meet our requirements for the next generation of UK military satellite communications, known generically as SKYNET 5. In order to allow the UK to consider fully the collaborative option, known as TRIMILSATCOM, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed with France and Germany on 16 December 1997 and tenders for the full range of options were received in February 1998.

Following a thorough evaluation of the options by the UK, it was clear that TRIMILSATCOM would not meet the UK's requirements in an affordable way, and, crucially, would not be ready in time to replace our existing satellites when they went out of service. The assessment also showed that a National PFI approach had the potential to offer an affordable and timely solution. It was therefore decided that the UK would not proceed with the TRIMILSATCOM PD programme. Our partners were informed accordingly on 12 August 1998.

We now plan to let two parallel design study contracts for a UK PFI solution in early 1999, with completion planned by the end of 2000. We envisage placing an Implementation contract some 12 months later, with the system coming into service in the middle of the decade.

France and Germany are being kept informed of the project's progress and their officials were briefed on the PFI programme on 3 December 1998.

Land-based Biological Detection Equipment

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the value of the increased procurement of land-based biological detection equipment announced by the Minister for Defence Procurement on 26 November 1998. [62016]

Mr. Spellar: The increased procurement of additional land-based biological defence equipment has a value of some £65 million. A number of Prototype Biological Detection Systems are being rapidly procured, some of which have already come into service. The planned procurement of Integrated Biological Detection Systems has been increased and we are also planning to develop and procure new Remote Biological Detection Systems.

C-130J Transport Aircraft

Ms Squire: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when the C-130J transport aircraft will enter service. [63096]

Mr. Spellar: On current plans the RAF will commence C-130J operations at RAF Lyneham in November 1999. This is over two years later than the original delivery date. The In-Service Date is defined as delivery of the 12th aircraft, and this is now estimated to be in May 2000, 22 months later than originally planned. The delay has arisen as a result of a succession of problems in Lockheed Martin's overall programme to design and produce the aircraft. The Department is receiving liquidated damages from Lockheed Martin to compensate for additional costs associated with running on the current C-130K aircraft. It is estimated that the total liquidated damages for late delivery of the aircraft, based on the above delivery schedule, will amount to some £50 million.

Retirement (Ethnic Minorities)

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what targets his Department has set for boosting recruitment among Britain's ethnic minorities. [61346]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave earlier today to my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Hamilton).

Armed Forces (Education and Training)

Mrs. Anne Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what steps the Government are taking to increase education and training opportunities in the armed forces. [61365]

Mr. Doug Henderson: We already provide a wide range of education and training opportunities for Armed Forces personnel. Our Learning Forces initiative extends from recruitment to resettlement and beyond. It is a major contribution to the Government's commitment to improving educational opportunities and to ensuring that the qualifications Service personnel receive are fully recognised and transferable when they return to civilian life.

Al Shifa Pharmaceutical Factory

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence, pursuant to his statement on 23 October in the Al Sharq Al Aursat newspaper, what evidence he has that the Al Shifa pharmaceutical factory was manufacturing offensive weapons or materials. [61463]

Mr. George Robertson: We have the assurance of the United States Government that their decision to resort to military action was based on compelling evidence that the Al Shifa factory was connected with chemical weapons development or manufacture. It would be inappropriate to discuss the details of the intelligence on which this was based, which are withheld in accordance with Exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Army Personnel

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence by what date he plans to increase Army establishments by 3,300 personnel. [62014]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Initial changes to the Army establishment were made at the beginning of November to reflect the additional 3,352 personnel agreed in the Strategic Defence Review. Some of the manpower increases will, however, not take effect until 2002. The Army remains on course to achieve full staffing of the new establishment by around 2004.

Nuclear, Biological and Chemical Weapons

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he will announce his conclusions following the review of the national defence response to the risks posed by *(a)* nuclear, *(b)* biological and *(c)* chemical weapons. [62015]

Mr. George Robertson: We hope to place a paper in the Library shortly.

Naval Exhibition, Chile

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the Minister for the Armed Forces attended the naval exhibition in Valparaiso, Chile; and if he will make a statement. [62071]

Mr. Doug Henderson: By mutual agreement, my planned visit to EXPONAVAL 98 in Valparaiso, Chile on 30 November was postponed as Mr. O. Guzman, the Chilean Defence Minister, was not in the country on that day.

E-mail Addresses

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence when he expects to review the allocation of e-mail addresses to personnel for whom his Department is responsible; when he expects to extend this facility to defence attachés; and if he will make a statement. [62099]

Mr. Spellar: The MOD makes extensive use of computer systems and a high proportion of staff use internal e-mail facilities as their principal method of circulating documents and other correspondence. However, for security reasons the Department's current policy is that external e-mail accounts are allocated only where there is a justified business case. Where these are provided, the facility is generally on a stand alone computer or network, again for security reasons.

As part of the work to establish a link during the coming year to the Government Secure Intranet, the MOD will be examining the opportunities for providing access to the Internet (including e-mail) for some personnel. The Department currently has no plans to provide Internet e-mail accounts to all of its personnel.

Support for Defence and Service Attachés is mainly provided by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Most Embassies and High Commissions have an Internet and e-mail facility, through which Attachés can be reached.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

EU Renewable Energy Task Force

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress has been made to date in establishing a European Union task force on renewable energy; if its membership and initial meeting date have been agreed; and if he will make a statement. [61934]

Mr. Battle: At the Energy Council on November 13, the UK stressed the importance of maintaining the momentum created by the Commission's 1997 White Paper ("Energy for the Future: Renewable Sources of Energy") and the Council Resolution on renewables adopted under the UK Presidency in May. I suggested that the establishment of a Commission led "task force" of senior experts on renewables could contribute to this.

This suggestion builds on an idea in the White Paper that a working group involving Commission and Member States be established to monitor measures undertaken and evaluate the impact of policy decisions with regard to the use of renewable energy sources. This group has met only once in 1998.

The Commission have not yet responded on the idea of a task force, but I understand they plan to hold a further meeting of their working group early in 1999.

If the idea of a Task Force on renewables is taken forward, it will be for the Commission to decide how this is to be constituted. Most Commission chaired committees have 2 representatives per Member State.

Ministerial Responsibilities

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a copy of the legal advice which he has received in respect of any potential conflicts of interest arising from his roles as

Secretary of State for Trade and Industry and Minister with responsibility for the New Millennium Experience Company. [61987]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* No. Legal advice of this nature attracts legal professional privilege, and as such is exempt from disclosure under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he sought the advice of his Permanent Secretary at the Department of Trade and Industry about potential conflicts of interest arising from his position as Secretary of State and as the sponsoring Minister of the New Millennium Experience Company; and what advice he received. [61996]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* Under normal Departmental procedures I received guidance on handling conflicts of interest in relation to decisions on competition cases on my appointment as Secretary of State. I received further advice in respect of competition issues involving sponsors of the Millennium Dome shortly afterwards. Following discussions with the Permanent Secretary and other officials, I announced on 6 August that I was satisfied that in relation to the British Airways/American Airlines alliance I could exercise my responsibilities properly. I also announced that I would consider any further competition cases involving companies associated with the Dome with similar care and would stand aside if I could not act, and be seen to act, fairly and impartially.

Advanced Manufacturing Centre, Chelmsford

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what *(a)* Government and *(b)* EU funding will be made available to replace the KONVER funding of the Advanced Manufacturing Centre in Chelmsford. [61888]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* I understand that the Advanced Manufacturing Centre has expressed confidence that they will be financially viable from the year 2000.

With regard to future EU support, the Commission has proposed that from 2000 onwards EU training support will be available through the new Objective 3 for areas such as Essex. In addition, although the KONVER II Programme finishes at the end of 1999, European Social Fund moneys can be spent until the end of June 2000 while moneys from the European Regional Development Fund can be spent until the end of 2001, provided they are committed by the end of 1999.

Electronic Commerce

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library copies of the submissions received in response to the Government's consultation on electronic commerce. [61995]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* A Summary of Responses was placed in the Library when I made a statement on Secure Electronic Commerce on 27 April 1998, *Official Report*, columns 26–27.

Ministerial Meetings

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many informal meetings at which Government business was discussed he has had with *(a)* the Ford Motor Company, *(b)* Thames Water, *(c)* GEC, *(d)* British Telecom, *(e)* Tesco, *(f)* BSkyB and *(g)* Manpower since becoming Secretary of State. [61985]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* I had a meeting with BT on 30 October, and met representatives from BT and BSkyB when they attended a meeting of the Information Age Partnerships on 19 November along with representatives of around 30 other companies involved in the Partnership. I have had no meetings with any of the other companies since becoming Secretary of State for Trade and Industry.

Combined Heat and Power Station, Castleford

Yvette Cooper: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he is yet in a position to make his decision on Yorkshire CoGen Ltd's application to construct a combined heat and power generating station at Castleford in West Yorkshire. [62932]

Mr. Battle: On Thursday 3 December 1998 I granted consent under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 to Yorkshire CoGen Ltd's application for my consent to construct a 56 MW combined heat and power generating station at the Hickson and Welch chemical works at Castleford.

I have placed a copy of the decision letter in the Library of the House.

Afro-Caribbean Businesses

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what programmes TECs administer to encourage Afro-Caribbeans to go into business. [61169]

Mrs. Roche: Business Link partnerships, in which TECs are a key partner, provide a range of high quality services to meet the needs of all established and potential businesses in their area.

The Department is working with the Business Link Network to ensure that ethnic minority businesses, including Afro-Caribbean entrepreneurs, are aware of the support available through BL partnerships and that those services are accessible and relevant.

Export Control Organisation

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the staff changes by grade in the Export Control Organisation since 3 May. [61930]

Mrs. Roche: The table shows the staff by grade in the Export Control Organisation on 3 May 1998 and on 30 November 1998.

Grade	*3 May 1998*	*30 November 1998*
Senior Civil Service	1	1
Range 11	2	2
Range 10	2	2
Range 9	14	14
Range 8	23	22
Range 7	5	5
Range 6	14	17

Grade	3 May 1998	30 November 1998
Range 5	4	4
Range 4	28	26
Range 3	7	8
Range 2	32	37
Range 2/Data Processor	3	4
Range 1	1	1
Total	136	143

Notes:

(i) Vacancies occur at the margins from time to time due to retirements, transfers etc. Such vacancies are filled as soon as practicable.

(ii) My previous answer to the hon. Member on 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *375–76*, gave the comparison between the current DTI structure and the former, more commonly known, Civil Service grades

Tobacco

Sir Alastair Goodlad: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has made to tobacco companies about marketing practices in developing countries; and if he will make a statement. [61481]

Mr. Wilson: In the absence of any relevant international agreement, it is for individual Governments, whether in developing or developed countries, to establish their own policies on how the marketing of tobacco products in their own domestic markets should be regulated. UK tobacco companies operating in those countries must comply with these policies but I would hope that such companies would apply the highest standards of marketing practices wherever they operate.

Aerospace Research

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much his Department provided for research and development on civil aerospace in each of the last five years; and if he will make it his policy to increase the amount provided. [62373]

Mr. Battle: The information on CARAD and launch investment refers to support for civil aeronautics and excludes support to the space industry.

Funding provided for civil aeronautics through the Civil Aircraft Research and Technology Demonstration (CARAD) Programme during each of the five years FY1993–94 to FY 1997–98 was:

	£k
1993–94	23,040
1994–95	23,358
1995–96	24,538
1996–97	23,844
1997–98	24,635

As far as CARAD is concerned, no decisions have yet been made about detailed DTI budget allocations in future years.

Support is provided by the Government for development of civil aerospace projects in the form of a repayable risk-sharing investment known as launch investment. For the period requested this funding was:

	£ million
1993–94	0.0
1994–95	0.0
1995–96	16.4
1996–97	1.3
1997–98	50.0

Applications for launch investment are considered on their merits and against other competing demands on public expenditure.

The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) also invests in aerospace related research. Over the last five years £12.5 million has been targeted through the industrially led Innovative Manufacture Initiative (IMI) Aerospace Programme.

	£ million
1993–94	0.0
1994–95	0.0
1995–96	5.8
1996–97	2.7
1997–98	3.5

Note:

Forecast outturn for IMI in 1998–99 is £2.5 million and another £2.5 million has been committed to this programme for 1999–2000.

More broadly, EPSRC has funded £87 million (including funding for inter-disciplinary research centres and an engineering design centre) over the last five years in research related to manufacture of aircraft, spacecraft and their components. In addition, underpinning research amounting to £7.3 million currently exists for aerodynamics.

Further opportunities for support of civil aerospace research and development exist in the recently launched managed programmes on Systems Integration, Materials Processing and Integrated Design and Manufacture with annual budgets of £4.5 million, £6 million and £1.5 million respectively.

Finally, EPSRC expects to consider funding proposals arising under Defence and Aerospace Research Partnerships (DARPs), a recent initiative launched by the Defence, Aerospace and Systems Panel.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what emergency measures are in place to provide back-up for the utilities in case of computer failures caused by the millennium bug. [62202]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* The utilities already have contingency plans in place to deal with an emergency. They are developing additional measures to respond to any failure caused by computer date changes in the Year 2000. The Department and the Government as a whole have a number of measures to respond to an emergency.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he is taking to ensure that the utilities achieve millennium bug compliance by the year 2000. [62201]

Mrs. Roche: The Department is working with all the key players to ensure that the public has confidence that there will be no disruption to key infrastructure services for which it has responsibility, as a result of the Millennium Bug.

DTI is itself in direct contact with the principal companies in these sectors, their regulators, Action 2000, Cabinet Office and others. It also participates in the National Infrastructure Forum.

I refer my hon. Friend to the answers given to the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) on 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 651–53, which provide further details on the position in the oil and gas, telecoms and electricity sectors.

Nuclear Safeguards

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what payments *(a)* BNFL and *(b)* UKAEA make to the Government to meet the costs of applying safeguards to the companies' nuclear facilities and operations; and what was the total cost of the application of nuclear safeguards in the United Kingdom in the last year for which figures are available. [62493]

Mrs. Roche: Nuclear safeguards in the United Kingdom are applied by Euratom and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The activities of the two organisations are funded through the contributions of their member states. Costs to UK nuclear operators do arise however from the requirements placed upon them to maintain nuclear materials accountancy systems and receive safeguards inspections. Neither Euratom nor the IAEA break down the costs of applying safeguards in individual countries. Figures which are available to us show that, in 1996, some 30 per cent. of Euratom and 4 per cent. of IAEA days of safeguards inspection effort were devoted to the UK. However, safeguards inspection days provide only a partial indication of total safeguards costs.

Radioactive Waste (Germany)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the specifications of the wastes to be returned to Germany under the agreement between the German and United Kingdom Governments on the treatment of irradiated German origin spent nuclear fuel by BNFL, dated 21 March 1991, Cm 1639 were agreed to be satisfactory; and if he will place in the Library copies of subsequent exchanges of notes on the repatriation arrangements for radioactive wastes arising from reprocessed German fuel. [62492]

Mr. Battle: Since 1976, all BNFL's contracts for the reprocessing of spent nuclear fuel for overseas customers have been underpinned by inter-governmental exchanges of letters covering such issues as the return of wastes and the assurances over the application of international safeguards. The arrangements for the return of the wastes are a commercial matter between BNFL and its overseas customers, subject to meeting the appropriate regulatory requirements.

TACIS

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received regarding the late payment of EU TACIS fund invoices submitted by British companies. [62069]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry has not received any representations regarding the late payment of EU Tacis fund invoices submitted by British companies. This subject was discussed during a meeting between my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade and representatives from the British Consultants Bureau on 1 October. The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my right hon. Friend the Member for Gateshead, East and Washington, West (Ms Quin), also raised the issue with the Commission in Brussels on 16 November, following up earlier action by senior officials at the Department for International Development and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Loan Guarantee Scheme

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to issue guarantees under the Loan Guarantee Scheme in euros for loans made in euros; and if he will make a statement. [62253]

Mrs. Roche: At present the Department has no plans to issue guarantees under the Loan Guarantee Scheme in euro for loans made in euro.

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to make an announcement on the future of regional selective assistance. [62393]

Mrs. Roche: The Government's approach to regional policy, including Regional Selective Assistance (RSA), will be set out in the forthcoming Competitiveness White Paper.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which Minister flew in February from Liverpool to London; how that Minister travelled to Liverpool; what was the purpose of the visit; if he will list the engagements which the Minister undertook; who accompanied the Minister; and what was the cost of the flight to his Department. [60905]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* My hon. Friend the Minister of State flew from Liverpool to London in February this year.

The Minister travelled to Halewood, Liverpool from his home town of Wigan by Government Car Service. The purpose of the visit was to attend the announcement of the Jaguar X400 to Halewood through provision of £43 million of aid support, both safeguarding and bringing new jobs to Halewood.

The Minister's engagements were to meet Halewood's Production Director, trade union representatives and the media.

The Minister was accompanied by his Assistant Private Secretary.

A private aircraft was chartered due to the Minister's necessity to return to London for an urgent meeting. Normal scheduled flights from Manchester airport, and travel to the airport, would not have given enough time for the Minister to return to London to attend this meeting. The cost of the flight to the department was £1,368.87.

Scheduled flights were planned to be used had it not been for the urgency of the Minister's return.

Growth Promoters

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the annual United Kingdom production of animal growth promoters in each of the past 10 years; and what percentage was exported. [61817]

Mr. Rooker: I have been asked to reply.

Annual data on the United Kingdom production and export of growth promoters are not currently compiled. Figures from the trade organisation, the National Office of Animal Health Limited, indicate that throughout the EU growth promoters account for about 15 per cent. of all (human and veterinary) antimicrobials. However, the EU Commission has recently asked member states to collect detailed information on the production and export of antimicrobial growth promoters (and coccidiostats) on an annual basis. It is intended that collection of this information will start on 1 July 1999.

HEALTH

Lifecare NHS Trust

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what reports he has received about financial irregularities at Lifecare NHS Trust; and if he will make a statement. [62780]

Mr. Milburn: The police are investigating a number of financial irregularities at Lifecare National Health Service Trust. The chairman has resigned and the chief executive and finance director have taken special leave during the continuing police investigation.

South Thames Regional Office of the National Health Service Executive has asked the chairman of Surrey Oaklands NHS Trust to look urgently into the corporate governance and management arrangements within Lifecare NHS Trust.

Grandparents (Access Rights)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to review the rights of grandparents to have access to grandchildren below 18 years of age who are in foster care. [62861]

Mr. Hutton: We have no plans to review the rights of grandparents to have access to grandchildren below 18 years of age who are in foster care. Current Children Act 1989 regulations and guidance already provide an adequate framework for contact between grandparents and their grandchildren in foster care.

Barnet Health Authority

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what extra funds have been, or are planned to be, made available to Barnet Health Authority since 1 May 1997; for what purposes those funds have been earmarked; and if he will make a statement. [62593]

Mr. Milburn: My hon. Friend tabled a similar question on 17 November. I have today replied by letter to both questions.

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made on reducing hospital waiting lists by Barnet Health Authority; and if he will make a statement. [62594]

Mr. Milburn: Barnet Health Authority is on course to meet its waiting list target of 5,846 by March 1999. The health authority's waiting list fell by 371, or 5.1 per cent., during October 1998, the largest reduction in the North Thames region. At the end of the month the waiting list stood at 6,865, an improvement on the level expected at this stage in the year. The health authority is continuing to work closely with local trusts to ensure that this encouraging progress is maintained.

Staffordshire Ambulance Service

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will inquire into the considerations which have led hospitals in the West Midlands to be unable to take patients carried by the Staffordshire Ambulance Service; and if he will make a statement. [62539]

Mr. Milburn: Comprehensive arrangements exist for managing escalations in demand for accident and emergency services in Birmingham and Solihull, and the Black Country is working towards such an arrangement. Acute hospitals work together to ensure that sufficient accident and emergency capacity is available to meet the needs of the community at all times.

Within these arrangements, a "respite" can be called by an individual hospital in the Black Country with the agreement of its trust chief executive, normally for a maximum of three hours. For Birmingham and Solihull, an additional measure is that the requests for respite have to be sanctioned by the emergency capacity manager. As soon as such a situation is declared, it is communicated to other nearby hospitals so they can absorb the excess demand.

Several respite periods were called in hospitals across part of the West Midlands during a period of unusual demand from 29 November to 1 December. At no time did these break existing arrangements and patients were appropriately diverted to other hospitals.

NHS Staff (Millennium Premium Payment)

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what advice he has given to NHS trusts regarding premium payments to NHS staff working on New Year's Eve 1999 and New Year's Day 2000. [62635]

Mr. Milburn: Health Service Circular "Year 2000 Problem—Human Resource Issues (HSC 1998/219)" was issued to all National Health Service employers on 20 November 1998. Copies are available in the Library.

Drugs

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he expects the Crown review on the prescribing, supply and administration of drugs to be published. [63055]

Mr. Milburn: We have received the final report and expect to be in a position to announce plans for its publication shortly.

Fundholding

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what contingency plans he has made in the event that no Act to replace fundholding by primary care groups has received Royal Assent by 31 March 1999. [62642]

Mr. Milburn: No new primary legislation is needed in order to implement our plans to establish Primary Care Groups as Committees of Health Authorities from 1 April 1999.

General Practitioners (Patient Registration)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what percentage of the population is not registered with a GP. [60994]

Mr. Milburn: Information is held centrally on the number of patients registered with a general practitioner. The total number of patients on the lists of Unrestricted Principals in England at 1 October 1997 was 50,904,322.

Source:

DOH GMP Census 1 October 1997.

Dental Services (Homeless People)

Mr. Crausby: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what special provision has been made for homeless people to have access to dental services. [61004]

Mr. Milburn: One of the functions of the Community Dental Service is to provide dental treatment for people with special needs, including homeless people. In addition, health authorities may make arrangements with a number of general dental practitioners to provide emergency dental services on a sessional basis for unregistered patients.

Clerical and Administrative Staff

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many clerical and administrative staff were employed by the National Health Service on *(a)* 30 September 1985, *(b)* 30 September 1990, *(c)* 30 September 1995 and *(d)* 30 September 1996. [60944]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 30 November 1998]:*

National Health Service Hospital and Community Health Services: Clerical and administration staff in the NHS, in England, as at 30 September for each year.

Year	*Whole time equivalent*
1985	110,940
1990	120,040
1995	133,120
1996	132,290

Notes:

Figures are rounded to the nearest ten.

Due to a change in classification in 1995 for collecting the data, from payscale to occupation code, 1995 and 1996 figures are non-comparable with earlier years.

Source:

Department of Health Annual Non-Medical Workforce Census

Patient Referrals

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what arrangements the Government have put in place to ensure that patients referred to hospital trusts without a contract from their health authority or primary care group are accepted as referrals by those trusts. [61800]

Mr. Milburn: From 1 April 1999, all patients will be treated under service agreements. Under new arrangements for out of area treatments, any referrals that cannot be planned for in a service agreement between the health authority and the primary care group and the National Health Service trust to whom the referral is made will be covered by a service agreement with the HA or PCG that is the main commissioner for the NHS trust concerned. HA/PCG cash limits will be adjusted to allow for this.

Out of area treatments will not require prior approval. Patients will continue to be treated according to clinical priority and all patients will be covered by the standards for quality and effectiveness specified in the main commissioner's service agreement. The freedom of doctors to refer is unchanged by this new system.

Private Prescriptions

Dr. Brand: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many NHS general practitioners have been found to be in breach of paragraph 43 of their terms of service for issuing a private prescription to patients on their list for each of the last 10 years. [61798]

Mr. Milburn: We do not have reliable information about decisions taken before 1 April 1995 (when the Health Services Authority came into existence), but since that date there have been no recorded instances of a general practitioner being found in breach of Paragraph 43 of the terms of service.

Cardiac Diseases

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients waiting for cardiac surgery in the last five years have died before the procedure was carried out. [61941]

Mr. Milburn: The information requested is not available centrally.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many (i) emergency and (ii) elective cardiac operations were carried out by the NHS in England in each of the last five years. [61943]

Mr. Hutton: Information for the last five years is shown in the table. 1997–98 is the latest year for which figures are available.

Cardiac operations Ordinary admissions and daycases combined: Completed counts of all episodes by method of admission for cardiac operations: NHS trusts hospitals in England from 1993–94 to 1997–98

Year	Cardiac operations		Total
	Emergency	Elective	
1993–94	23,065	89,675	112,740
1994–95	26,240	100,708	126,948
1995–96	25,776	102,376	128,152
1996–97[1]	28,714	105,515	134,229
1997–98[1]	30,370	111,988	142,358

[1] Figures for 1996–97 and 1997–98 are provisional, no adjustments have yet been made for shortfalls in data, (i.e. the data is ungrossed) OPCS 4 codes used are KOO-K71.9.

Source:

Department of Health, Hospital Episode Statistics (HES).

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the amounts spent by the NHS in each of the last five years on the prevention of cardiac diseases. [61944]

Mr. Hutton: It is not possible to identify total spend on the prevention of cardiac diseases throughout the National Health Service. A considerable amount of preventative work is undertaken by general practitioners, primary care teams, health authorities and trusts, but the amounts spent cannot readily be split between prevention and treatment.

In addition, many health promotion activities on, for example, smoking cessation, diet and physical activity have a range of health benefits and it is difficult to apportion the cost of these between different diseases.

Cardiac Surgery

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients *(a)* are waiting for cardiac surgery, *(b)* have been waiting more than six months for cardiac surgery and *(c)* have been waiting more than 12 months for cardiac surgery in each health authority. [61946]

Mr. Milburn: Information on the number of residents of each English Health Authority waiting for hospital admission by speciality, including cardiothoracic surgery and cardiology, is published quarterly in Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England (Resident Based). Copies are available in the Library. The latest available data for cardiothoracic surgery are shown in the table.

Numbers waiting for cardiothoracic surgery at end-September 1998

Health Authority	Total	Less than 6 months	Less than 12 months
Wigan and Bolton Health Authority	287	134	49
West Pennine Health Authority	202	110	36
Southampton and South West Hampshire Health Authority	195	86	28
Manchester Health Authority	193	89	24
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly Health Authority	212	115	23
North West Lancashire Health Authority	173	51	21
South and West Devon Health Authority	307	112	20
Bury and Rochdale Health Authority	152	79	20
South Cheshire Health Authority	143	57	15
Shropshire Health Authority	153	81	14
Brent and Harrow Health Authority	169	54	14
Wolverhampton Health Authority	92	52	12
Suffolk Health Authority	256	115	11
East London and City Health Authority	189	84	11
Redbridge and Waltham Forest Health Authority	187	81	11
Morecambe Bay Health Authority	106	45	11
Liverpool Health Authority	160	43	11
North Staffordshire Health Authority	176	69	10
West Surrey Health Authority	186	65	10
Wiltshire Health Authority	128	57	10
Stockport Health Authority	93	50	10
West Kent Health Authority	294	123	9
North Essex Health Authority	239	114	9
Bedfordshire Health Authority	102	31	9
South Lancashire Health Authority	119	29	9
Sheffield Health Authority	207	77	8
Salford and Trafford Health Authority	119	64	8
East Lancashire Health Authority	134	36	8
North Cheshire Health Authority	102	35	8
West Hertfordshire Health Authority	114	33	8
St. Helens and Knowsley Health Authority	100	29	8
Bradford Health Authority	171	71	7
South Staffordshire Health Authority	149	70	7
Berkshire Health Authority	188	50	7
Barking and Havering Health Authority	133	46	7
East and North Hertfordshire Health Authority	130	45	7
Hillingdon Health Authority	71	26	7
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham Health Authority	184	72	6
Doncaster Health Authority	157	62	6
Gloucestershire Health Authority	138	57	6
Enfield and Haringey Health Authority	149	51	6
Barnet Health Authority	70	25	6
Wakefield Health Authority	93	29	5
Wirral Health Authority	69	21	5
Bexley and Greenwich Health Authority	130	75	4
Calderdale and Kirklees Health Authority	210	73	4
South Essex Health Authority	165	68	4

Numbers waiting for cardiothoracic surgery at end-September 1998

Health Authority	Total	Less than 6 months	Less than 12 months
North Derbyshire Health Authority	108	41	4
Sefton Health Authority	77	27	4
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow Health Authority	87	25	4
Leeds Health Authority	232	81	3
East Kent Health Authority	174	66	3
Rotherham Health Authority	107	38	3
North and Mid Hampshire Health Authority	102	30	3
Croydon Health Authority	109	29	3
Camden and Islington Health Authority	80	25	3
North Nottinghamshire Health Authority	109	18	3
Isle of Wight Health Authority	83	7	3
Worcestershire Health Authority	164	87	2
South Humber Health Authority	134	65	2
East Riding Health Authority	134	62	2
Lincolnshire Health Authority	192	54	2
Sandwell Health Authority	85	42	2
Barnsley Health Authority	88	41	2
Nottingham Health Authority	193	40	2
Northamptonshire Health Authority	108	39	2
Warwickshire Health Authority	110	34	2
Oxfordshire Health Authority	90	33	2
West Sussex Health Authority	150	32	2
Bromley Health Authority	50	15	2
Birmingham Health Authority	329	157	1
North Yorkshire Health Authority	227	80	1
East Norfolk Health Authority	225	78	1
Dudley Health Authority	127	75	1
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Health Authority	130	45	1
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth Health Authority	145	41	1
North West Anglia Health Authority	145	41	1
Buckinghamshire Health Authority	86	31	1
East Surrey Health Authority	88	29	1
South Derbyshire Health Authority	146	25	1
East Sussex Brighton and Hove Health Authority	131	18	1
Kingston and Richmond Health Authority	43	8	1
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster Health Authority	35	5	1
Tees Health Authority	265	94	0
Durham Health Authority	182	60	0
Gateshead and South Tyneside Health Authority	132	44	0
Newcastle and North Tyneside Health Authority	150	43	0
Leicestershire Health Authority	195	42	0
Solihull Health Authority	76	38	0
Sunderland Health Authority	77	34	0
North Cumbria Health Authority	79	32	0
Walsall Health Authority	80	31	0
Somerset Health Authority	129	27	0
Cambridge and Huntingdon Health Authority	105	26	0
Avon Health Authority	150	24	0
Northumberland Health Authority	86	22	0
Herefordshire Health Authority	44	21	0
Coventry Health Authority	55	11	0
Dorset Health Authority	123	0	0
North and East Devon Health Authority	12	0	0
England Total	14,109	5,154	622

Research Papers

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many series of research papers his Department produces; and what are the names of each of these series of research papers. [62051]

Ms Jowell: The Department takes a number of steps to ensure that the research it supports is widely disseminated:

The National Health Service research and development health technology assessment programme produces a series of monographs reporting on research findings from projects that it has commissioned. This series called "Health Technology Assessment", is indexed in MEDLINE and EMBASE. The NHS Centre for Reviews and Dissemination and the University of York produce a series of systematic reviews of research. Both of these are funded by the Department.

Other Departmental/NHS research and development programmes produce special publications when the need arises. These cover individual projects or more general themes.

The Department actively encourages all of the researchers it funds to publish their findings in peer reviewed journals.

The Department places particular emphasis on reviews of research and on producing accessible databases of research outputs. The Department funds the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination to produce the Database of Abstracts of Reviews of Effectiveness (DARE), which is available on the Internet. The Department also funds the UK Cochrane Centre (which is a major contributor to the international Cochrane Collaboration). The "Cochrane Library", which is available on CD Rom, contains the Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews.

The White Paper "The New NHS" undertook to make research findings from the NHS research and development programme available in a user-friendly format. We are now considering how this can be done and how all of the above can be brought together via the new national electronic library for health.

Electric Wheelchairs

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Government have to increase the provision of electric wheelchairs; and if he will make a statement. [62297]

Mr. Hutton: Electrically powered chairs for indoor use have always been among the range of wheelchairs available through the National Health Service. In 1996, additional funding of £27 million was announced for the provision of electrically powered indoor/outdoor

wheelchairs. This funding was made available over a four-year period starting in 1996–97. From 1999–2000, the sum of £6 million for the electronically powered indoor/outdoor scheme will become recurrent, allowing maintenance of the increased number of disabled people being supplied with powered wheelchairs.

Nurses' Pay

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his proposals for increasing nurses' pay. [62491]

Mr. Milburn: Nurses' pay is recommended by the independent review body for nursing staff, midwives, health visitors and the professions allied to medicine. We want to see a fair pay rise for nurses, which is affordable and which will support the modernisation of the National Health Service. We have asked the review body in particular to consider improvements to the starting pay of qualified nurses within an affordable overall pay uplift recommendation for all nurses. The recommendations of the review body will be fully considered when received in the new year.

Multiple Sclerosis

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many persons diagnosed as having MS have their continuing health care managed by a neurologist in association with their general practitioner; and if he will make a statement. [62533]

Mr. Hutton: The information is not available in the form requested. Health care for people with Multiple Sclerosis is the responsibility of relevant health care professionals. Patterns of care vary according to local arrangements for diagnosis, treatment and care and a wide range of National Health Service services are available to people with disabilities and long-term health care needs.

Diana Nurses

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for funding the Diana nurses beyond the initial three year period; and if he will make a statement. [62245]

Mr. Hutton: Following evaluation of the first pioneering teams, it is intended that Diana Community Children's Nursing teams will be extended to provide care to people across the United Kingdom. These teams will become a permanent memorial to Diana, Princess of Wales. The experience of the early pioneering teams will be used to determine the level of funding in future years.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter of 22 October regarding a constituent (Ref. POH(2)5608/15.). [62788]

Mr. Milburn: I regret the delay and will be replying to my hon. Friend shortly.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Open Access Programme

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what is the objective of the Employment Service's computer terminal Open Access programme; [62326]

(2) for how long the pilot of the Employment Service Open Access programme has been running; and what plans he has to make the programme available nationally. [62327]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Chris Pond, dated December 1998:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State for Education and Employment has asked me to reply to your questions regarding the Employment Service's computer terminal Open Access Programme, how long the pilot has been running and what plans he has made to make it available nationally. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The key objective of the Open Access pilot programme, which has been running in ten Jobcentres in our Newcastle, Manchester South and Wiltshire districts since March, is to trial the use by jobseekers of self-service technology to search out and apply for jobs. The kiosks replace the system of displaying printed vacancy cards, which generally contain limited information, on boards in Jobcentres. Using the kiosks jobseekers can obtain detailed information about a job, print it out, and contact an employer directly from the kiosk telephone.

We are currently evaluating the results to date of these pilots in order to assess their effectiveness. At the same time, together with our strategic IT partner, EDS, we are looking at how we can best make use of new technology more widely, including kiosks, public use PCs and the Internet, to ensure that our further development of open access technology can make the most effective use of all of these information media. We hope to reach interim conclusions early next year.

I hope this is helpful.

Minimum Wage

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what plans he has to prepare the Employment Service for the introduction of the National Minimum Wage in April 1999; [62325]

(2) what measures he proposes to ensure that the Employment Service does not advertise jobs at a wage below the legal minimum; [62323]

(3) what measures the Employment Service is taking to promote the enforcement of the National Minimum Wage. [62324]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Chris Pond, dated December 1998:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your questions concerning the Employment Service's preparations for the introduction, promotion and enforcement of the national minimum wage. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

Prior to the coming into force of the national minimum wage legislation, we intend to issue guidance to Jobcentres making clear that, from April [illegible], they should not accept from employers vacancies which do not comply with the requirements of the legislation and its associated regulations. From early next year staff in Jobcentres will be asked to alert employers using the Jobcentre, who may currently offer rates below those established by the national minimum wage legislation, to the steps they will need to take to ensure that they comply with the legislation. The Employment Service will also display posters and literature in Jobcentres in support of the publicity campaign by the DTI to raise awareness of the national minimum wage.

Once the legislation is in force any complaints which Jobcentres receive concerning employers who may not be meeting the requirements of the legislation will be forwarded to the appropriate enforcement agency to investigate.

I hope this is helpful.

Age Discrimination

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultation he has had with the Industrial Tribunal Service since May 1997 regarding age discrimination; and when he expects to consult it regarding the draft code on age diversity in employment. [62316]

Mr. Andrew Smith: My Officials wrote to the Presidents of the Employment Tribunals in October of this year asking for initial reactions to a draft non-statutory Code of Practice on tackling age diversity and asking whether it raised issues for the Tribunals. The Presidents were subsequently sent copies of the published consultation document soon after its launch.

Employment Tribunals are independent bodies who are practised in determining the reasonableness of employment practices in particular cases. Their views, informed by their expertise in this area, will, therefore, provide contribution to the consultation exercise.

Bugbusters

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how much of the budget for the Bugbusters programme has been spent to date; and of that amount how much has been spent on *(a)* training, *(b)* administration and *(c)* publicity; [61174]

(2) how many training courses have been accredited on the Millennium Bugbusters programme; and how many people have completed such courses to date. [61175]

Mr. Mudie: As at 27 November 1998, the number of people who had started Bug Buster Training was 1,364, of the number 947 had completed their training. The total number of Millennium Bug Accredited Training Providers is 155 and they have available 1,270 Accredited Training Courses.

Expenditure brought to account on the Bug Buster Programme in the year to date is £551,000; of this amount £350,000 has been spent on developing training courses and on administration, £135,000 on advertising and publicity costs and £66,000 on training.

All figures relate to England.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what resources his Department has committed to training small and medium enterprises to deal with year 2000 compliance in the current financial year; and what resources he plans to commit in 1999–2000. [60868]

Mr. Mudie: £26 million has been committed in the current financial year to deal with year 2000 compliance. There are no plans at present to commit any resources in 1999–2000.

National Schools Standards Task Force

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many parent representatives there are on the National Schools Standards Task Force. [61429]

Mr. Blunkett: Although there is no designated representative of parents, Task Force members are in regular contact with parents and parents' groups. One of the Task Force's subgroups is actively engaged in involving parents and the community in raising standards.

New Deal Gateway

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have *(a)* entered the New Deal Gateway and *(b)* taken up each New Deal option in the Portsmouth City Council area since the New Deal's inception. [62384]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The latest Government Statistical Service figures for clients in the Portsmouth Unit of Delivery show that to the end of September, 143 people had secured unsubsidised jobs.

1,094 young people had entered the Gateway and 217 had joined one of the four options. This breaks down to: 43 on the Employment option; 19 on the Voluntary Sector option; 8 on Environment Task Force; and 147 on the Full-Time Education and Training option.

I am encouraged by the positive start made in the Portsmouth Unit of Delivery, which reflects the encouraging start to the programme overall.

Schools Funding Formula

Mr. Steinberg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the balance of funding between primary and secondary pupils enshrined in their LMS formula in each local education authority in England and Wales. [62350]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table gives, for each local education authority in England, for 1998–99, the average of the budget share per pupil separately for

primary and secondary schools. Responsibility for schools in Wales rests with my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales.

LEA-maintained schools in England—1989–99
average funding per pupil

£

Local education authority	*Primary*	*Secondary*
City of London	3,032	0
Camden	2,111	2,821
Greenwich	1,949	2,724
Hackney	2,160	2,860
Hammersmith and Fulham	2,153	2,880
Islington	2,089	2,845
Kensington and Chelsea	2,443	3,255
Lambeth	2,280	2,985
Lewisham	2,072	2,876
Southwark	2,037	2,654
Tower Hamlets	2,140	2,727
Wandsworth	1,986	2,562
Westminster	2,112	2,792
Barking/Dagenham	1,836	2,410
Barnet	1,815	2,579
Bexley	1,488	2,291
Brent	1,999	2,758
Bromley	1,686	2,263
Croydon	1,799	2,520
Ealing	1,848	2,437
Enfield	1,739	2,421
Haringey	1,852	2,562
Harrow	1,838	2,631
Havering	1,735	2,610
Hillingdon	1,712	2,630
Hounslow	1,904	2,393
Kingston	1,708	2,302
Merton	1,817	2,340
Newham	1,683	2,519
Redbridge	1,618	2,454
Richmond	1,816	2,353
Sutton	1,742	2,452
Waltham Forest	1,867	2,101
Birmingham	1,789	2,390
Coventry	1,647	2,316
Dudley	1,633	2,234
Sandwell	1,548	2,222
Solihull	1,599	2,163
Walsall	1,545	2,202
Wolverhampton	1,453	2,278
Knowsley	1,652	2,304
Liverpool	1,681	2,226
St. Helens	1,524	2,257
Sefton	1,541	2,328
Wirral	1,527	2,242
Bolton	1,521	2,149
Bury	1,424	2,084
Manchester	1,554	2,257
Oldham	1,553	2,249
Rochdale	1,464	2,160
Salford	1,553	2,709
Stockport	1,502	2,114
Tameside	1,458	2,014
Trafford	1,337	2,187
Wigan	1,510	2,273
Barnsley	1,290	2,008
Doncaster	1,560	2,282
Rotherham	1,501	2,081
Sheffield	1,535	2,080
Bradford	1,588	1,805
Calderdale	1,505	2,227
Kirklees	1,475	2,179
Leeds	1,693	2,272
Wakefield	1,431	1,934
Gateshead	1,524	2,141
Newcastle	1,529	2,118

LEA-maintained schools in England—1989–99
average funding per pupil

£

Local education authority	*Primary*	*Secondary*
North Tyneside	1,534	2,095
South Tyneside	1,459	1,415
Sunderland	1,612	2,197
Isles of Scilly	3,000	5,000
Bath and NE Somerset	1,615	2,280
Bristol	1,674	2,462
North Somerset	1,575	2,249
South Gloucestershire	1,555	2,181
Hartlepool	1,447	2,132
Middlesbrough	1,455	2,293
Redcar and Cleveland	1,546	2,246
Stockton on Tees	1,516	2,170
Hull	1,577	2,089
East Riding	1,482	2,070
North East Lincolnshire	1,583	2,161
North Lincolnshire	1,518	2,078
North Yorkshire	1,546	2,297
York	1,524	2,241
Bedfordshire	1,488	2,015
Luton	1,523	2,298
Buckinghamshire	1,351	2,024
Milton Keynes	1,469	2,283
Derbyshire	1,330	2,121
Derby City	1,320	2,200
Dorset	1,505	2,028
Poole	1,431	2,044
Bournemouth	1,462	2,124
Durham	1,483	2,141
Darlington	1,491	2,103
East Sussex	1,506	2,281
Brighton and Hove	1,522	2,315
Hampshire	1,642	2,214
Portsmouth	1,707	2,272
Southampton	1,753	2,367
Leicestershire	1,544	2,139
Leicester City	1,531	2,158
Rutland	1,691	0
Staffordshire	1,434	1,947
Stoke-on-Trent	1,477	2,075
Wiltshire	1,437	2,042
Swindon	1,452	2,127
Bracknell Forest	1,580	2,261
Windsor and Maidenhead	1,579	2,194
West Berkshire	1,598	2,211
Reading	1,548	2,291
Slough	1,590	2,399
Wokingham	1,520	2,212
Cambridgeshire	1,488	2,050
Peterborough	1,419	2,148
Cheshire	1,542	2,223
Halton	1,587	2,134
Warrington	1,525	2,157
Devon	1,516	2,170
Plymouth	1,533	2,236
Torbay	1,483	2,171
Essex	1,596	2,295
Southend-on-Sea	1,645	2,374
Thurrock	1,635	2,432
Herefordshire	1,526	2,097
Worcestershire	1,466	1,940
Kent	1,596	2,269
Medway Towns	1,561	2,238
Lancashire	1,476	2,163
Blackburn with Darwen	1,463	2,148
Blackpool	1,458	2,186
Nottinghamshire	1,441	2,096
Nottingham City	1,649	2,155
Shropshire	1,480	2,262
Telford and Wrekin	1,375	2,415
Cornwall	1,517	2,064

LEA-maintained schools in England—1989–99
average funding per pupil

£

Local education authority	*Primary*	*Secondary*
Cumbria	1,577	2,261
Gloucestershire	1,497	2,097
Hertfordshire	1,634	2,351
Isle of Wight	1,641	2,316
Lincolnshire	1,488	2,271
Norfolk	1,663	2,349
Northamptonshire	1,505	2,118
Northumberland	1,544	2,229
Oxfordshire	1,563	2,095
Somerset	1,542	2,132
Suffolk	1,555	2,335
Surrey	1,647	2,135
Warwickshire	1,432	2,265
West Sussex	1,590	2,243

Disabled Students

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many local education authorities provide information on funding, entrance criteria, institutions' facilities, etc., for disabled students in the form of *(a)* Braille, *(b)* audio tape, *(c)* large print and *(d)* signing. [62884]

Mr. Mudie: At present local education authorities may provide these facilities if they so wish, but there are no figures collected on the number which do so. Implementation of the remaining provisions of Part III of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 will mean that from October next year service providers (including local education authorities) will be required to make reasonable adjustments to the way in which they provide their service including the provision of information in alternative formats for disabled users of the service.

Secondary School Pupils

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many secondary schools in *(a)* Hertfordshire and *(b)* England have more than 2,000 pupils. [62485]

Ms Estelle Morris: Six maintained secondary schools in England had more than 2,000 pupils in January 1998. None of them were located in Hertfordshire Local Education Authority area.

Exclusions

Ms Buck: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of secondary school pupils in each local education authority area were permanently excluded from school in 1997–98; and what proportion of all pupils were educated in pupil referral units or equivalent in that year. [62100]

Ms Estelle Morris: The latest available information on pupils permanently excluded from secondary schools in each Local Education Authority area in England, for the 1996–97 school year, was published in Press Notice 451/98, which is available in the Library.

Information on pupils in Pupil Referral Units in each Local Education Authority area in England in January 1998 is shown in the following table.

January 1998

	Number (headcount)	*Total*	*Percentage of pupils in pupil referral units*
England	7,740	8,260,582	0.1
North East	426	452,060	0.1
Hartlepool	29	17,154	0.2
Middlesborough	0	27,285	0.0
Redcar and Cleveland	55	26,822	0.2
Stockton-on-Tees	51	35,427	0.1
Darlington	41	17,243	0.2
Durham	10	83,946	0.0
Northumberland	0	53,329	0.0
Gateshead	20	32,681	0.1
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	75	46,459	0.2
North Tyneside	79	33,242	0.2
South Tyneside	47	26,731	0.2
Sunderland	19	51,741	0.0
North West and Merseyside	820	1,211,048	0.1
North West	378	952,097	0.0
Cheshire	99	170,267	0.1
Cumbria	160	82,069	0.2
Bolton	5	50,208	0.0
Bury	59	32,416	0.2
Manchester	0	77,066	0.0
Oldham	0	43,930	0.0
Rochdale	0	37,526	0.0
Salford	0	39,802	0.0
Stockport	9	49,308	0.0
Tameside	26	39,022	0.1
Trafford	0	38,760	0.0
Wigan	0	51,468	0.0
Lancashire	20	240,255	0.0
Merseyside	442	258,951	0.2
Knowsley	24	30,149	0.1
Liverpool	212	85,627	0.2
St. Helens	0	31,238	0.0
Sefton	103	52,233	0.2
Wirral	103	59,704	0.2
Yorkshire and Humber	961	866,079	0.1
East Riding of Yorkshire	0	50,723	0.0
City of Kingston-upon-Hull	12	45,713	0.0
North East Lincolnshire	1	29,311	0.0
North Lincolnshire	3	25,943	0.0
York	72	27,354	0.3
North Yorkshire	14	93,097	0.0
Barnsley	0	35,686	0.0
Doncaster	96	53,565	0.2
Rotherham	63	46,590	0.1
Sheffield	136	78,519	0.2
Bradford	39	94,911	0.0
Calderdale	0	36,354	0.0
Kirklees	19	67,326	0.0
Leeds	245	122,667	0.2
Wakefield	261	58,320	0.4
East Midlands	376	699,425	0.1
Derby	47	40,136	0.1
Derbyshire	27	118,638	0.0
Leicester City	0	52,097	0.0

January 1998

	Number (headcount)	Total	Percentage of pupils in pupil referral units
Rutland	0	6,627	0.0
Leicestershire	0	97,370	0.0
Lincolnshire	9	101,163	0.0
Northamptonshire	239	110,780	0.2
Nottinghamshire	54	172,614	0.0
West Midlands	970	934,120	0.1
Hereford and Worcester	202	116,162	0.2
Shropshire	2	72,478	0.0
Stoke	5	40,544	0.0
Staffordshire	58	138,521	0.0
Warwickshire	44	82,779	0.1
Birmingham	391	188,765	0.2
Coventry	24	54,195	0.0
Dudley	34	51,337	0.1
Sandwell	86	52,929	0.2
Solihull	52	40,389	0.1
Walsall	0	50,835	0.0
Wolverhampton	72	45,186	0.2
Eastern	453	882,641	0.1
Luton	11	32,014	0.0
Bedfordshire	14	69,113	0.0
Cambridgeshire	52	112,771	0.0
Essex	23	253,309	0.0
Hertfordshire	184	190,911	0.1
Norfolk	45	117,116	0.0
Suffolk	124	107,407	0.1
London	2,005	1,153,699	0.2
Inner London	1,006	413,708	0.2
City of London	0	1,847	0.0
Camden	84	29,673	0.3
Hackney	88	30,435	0.3
Hammersmith and Fulham	118	20,657	0.6
Haringey	42	34,878	0.1
Islington	50	25,048	0.2
Kensington and Chelsea	71	21,502	0.3
Lambeth	42	29,718	0.1
Lewisham	127	37,309	0.3
Newham	34	46,417	0.1
Southwark	105	39,778	0.3
Tower Hamlets	153	37,158	0.4
Wandsworth	92	35,699	0.3
Westminster	0	23,589	0.0
Outer London	999	739,991	0.1
Barking and Dagenham	0	28,534	0.0
Barnet	48	53,623	0.1
Bexley	68	39,514	0.2
Brent	41	38,719	0.1
Bromley	110	49,558	0.2
Croydon	185	56,961	0.3
Ealing	136	48,583	0.3
Enfield	115	47,778	0.2
Greenwich	75	38,967	0.2
Harrow	52	33,214	0.2
Havering	8	36,972	0.0
Hillingdon	45	42,374	0.1
Hounslow	23	36,174	0.1
Kingston-upon-Thames	28	23,433	0.1
Merton	0	27,937	0.0
Redbridge	36	43,707	0.1
Richmond-upon-Thames	0	27,474	0.0
Sutton	29	29,879	0.1
Waltham Forest	0	36,590	0.0

January 1998

	Number (headcount)	Total	Percentage of pupils in pupil referral units
South East	1,329	1,290,151	0.1
Berkshire	42	138,156	0.0
Milton Keynes	19	35,843	0.1
Buckinghamshire	39	81,988	0.0
Brighton and Hove	25	34,427	0.1
East Sussex	64	72,916	0.1
Portsmouth	48	29,113	0.2
Southampton	118	33,270	0.4
Hampshire	138	189,792	0.1
Isle of Wight	8	19,996	0.0
Kent	365	269,546	0.1
Oxfordshire	119	98,116	0.1
Surrey	260	172,052	0.2
West Sussex	84	114,936	0.1
South West	400	771,359	0.1
Bath and North East Somerset	0	29,286	0.0
City of Bristol	1	60,791	0.0
North Somerset	29	28,418	0.1
South Gloucestershire	0	40,449	0.0
Cornwall	0	75,688	0.0
Isles of Scilly	0	268	0.0
Devon	86	165,660	0.1
Bournemouth	0	22,735	0.0
Poole	20	21,097	0.1
Dorset	29	58,815	0.0
Gloucestershire	57	91,831	0.1
Somerset	54	77,987	0.1
Swindon	23	29,263	0.1
Wiltshire	101	69,071	0.1

[1] Excludes pupils who are also registered at a mainstream or special school

Age Diversity

Ms Perham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what key criteria he intends to put in place to monitor the effectiveness of the code of practice on age diversity in employment. [62178]

Ms Hodge: Key indicators which will measure the labour market position of older workers are given in Annex E of "Action on Age", the report on the year long consultation undertaken on age discrimination in employment. These indicators include the employment rate, the claimant count and ILO measures of unemployment, as well as economic activity rates. These indicators will be reviewed each year in June.

In addition, we have commissioned a research project which will evaluate the Code's effectiveness in promoting an age diverse workforce. The research will cover a wide range of employers, looking in detail at employer policies and practices in recruitment and employment and the impact on age diversity in their workforce. As we said in "Action on Age", the full evaluation will be completed by February 2001.

Sixth-form Students

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase the levels of *(a)* home to study transport and *(b)* other support for 16–18 year old students in (i) the FE sector and (ii) LEA sixth forms. [62089]

Mr. Mudie: The Secretary of State has announced an extra £67 million for a comprehensive package of post-16 student support over the next 2 years. It will fund the new Education Maintenance Allowance pilots, and boost and extend Access Funds for students in further education and introduce a new access fund for pupils in school sixth forms as well as supporting specific provision for child care and resident attendance at college. Provision for transport is allowed for in both the access funds, and there will be other funding available to help LEAs to co-ordinate and integrate post-16 transport.

University for Industry

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment from which budget head within his Department he plans to allocate future resources for the University for Industry. [61809]

Mr. Mudie: Funding for the University for Industry will be allocated from the overall Department for Education and Employment resources agreed in the Comprehensive Spending Review. Expenditure will be from a specific University for Industry subhead.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposed expenditure for the University for Industry he expects to be included within the £40 million allocated within the Comprehensive Spending Review for start-up costs. [61807]

Mr. Mudie: The precise way in which the £40 million budget will be spent in 1999–2000 will be determined after Ministers have considered the University for Industry's Corporate Plan which we expect to receive shortly. I would expect, however, that expenditure will cover a range of areas necessary to ensure that the University for Industry gets off to the best possible start. These are likely to include the development of innovative learning materials and the establishment of a network of learning centres to link communities to University for Industry opportunities.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will place a copy of the business plan for the University for Industry in the Library; and if he will make a statement. [61825]

Mr. Mudie: The University for Industry Transition Board will submit a three-year Corporate Plan to Ministers shortly. It will contain commercially sensitive material and is not intended for publication. However, I expect the University for Industry to make a range of information publicly available in the New Year. This may include publishing an abbreviated version of the Corporate Plan.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what additional resources he expects to allocate to the University for Industry in each of the years 2000–01 and 2001–02; and if these resources will be allocated from the Comprehensive Spending Review total for education. [61808]

Mr. Mudie: The Department plans to announce decisions on funding beyond 1999–2000 in the Departmental Report which is due to be published in the spring. Any such resources will be allocated from the Comprehensive Spending Review total for the Department for Education and Employment. Expenditure will be from a specific University for Industry subhead.

Student Loans

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the current age limit is for students to have access to student loans; and what plans he has to increase the age limit during the next three years. [61821]

Mr. Mudie: For the 1998–99 academic year, a student must be aged under 50 at the start of his or her course in order to be eligible for a student loan.

As my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Education and Employment announced on 8 June this year, we plan to extend eligibility for loans to those students aged 50 to 54 at the start of their courses who plan to return to employment.

This extension will take effect from the 1999–2000 academic year. It will apply to students starting courses in 1999–2000. It will also apply to students who started courses in 1998–99, except those (such as gap year students) who are entitled to continue receiving maintenance grants and loans under the previous arrangements.

We are currently considering the arrangements in more detail and will provide full information for students early in 1999.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what the expected total income is from tuition fees from all undergraduates entering higher education institutions in 1998–99; what the level is of additional funding provided by his Department for higher education institutions in 1998–99; what the level of funding is per undergraduate student in 1998–99 as a result of the introduction of tuition fees and additional funding from his Department; and what the level of funding was per undergraduate student in each of the previous five years. [61813]

Mr. Mudie: Universities and colleges are expected to receive £130 million through tuition fee contributions from new full-time undergraduates in 1998–99. The funding package for 1998–99 allowed an extra £165 million to be spent on higher education, of which £129 million was for institutions, broadly equivalent to the extra fee income, and £36 million was for measures to widen access.

The published unit funding index for higher education (Departmental Report, March 1998, pp 61) is based on publicly planned funding per full-time equivalent (FTE) student. The figures do not distinguish between undergraduates and postgraduates. The level of funding per student in cash terms for the last six years is set out in the table.

£

Financial Year[1]	*Unit funding*[2] *(cash)*
1993–94	5,015
1994–95	4,973
1995–96	4,930
1996–97	4,789

Financial Year[1]	£ Unit funding[2] (cash)
1997–98	4,785
1998–99	4,923

[1] In order to provide a consistent series over the period, the figures have been adjusted to take account of transfer of dual support research funds to the Office of Science and Technology in 1993–94, 1994–95 and 1995–96 and the mainstreaming of continuing education students in 1995–96.
[2] Publicly planned fund includes grants to the HE Funding Council for England and, from 1995, the Teacher Training Agency for both recurrent and capital purposes and full-time undergraduate tuition fees paid through Local Education Authorities. In 1998–99 they include students' estimated private contributions towards the new £1,000 flat rate fee.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many non-UK EU students were expected to commence undergraduate studies at UK universities during the current academic year; and what was the estimated total amount of tuition fees to be collected from these students. [61812]

Mr. Mudie: Our forecasts have projected that around 15 thousand EU students will begin full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses in England and Wales in academic year 1998–99. The expected contribution from these students towards their tuition fees totals some £7 million.

Adult Education and Training

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what level of resources was allocated by each local education authority to non-statutory adult education and training services in each of the years 1992–93 to 1997–98. [61820]

Mr. Mudie: The following table sets out information on the net recurrent expenditure on education for adults reported by all local education authorities in England for the period 1992–93 to 1996–97. Figures for 1997–98 are not yet available. Some local authorities also support training for adults. Information about spending in this area is not held centrally.

Over the next three financial years we are offering all Local Education Authorities in England additional resource to strengthen the contribution they make to lifelong learning. In the first year £9 million will be available to Local Education Authorities to develop new, high quality, initiatives to widen participation in learning, in partnership with local learning providers, and to underpin future development activity with Local Authority Lifelong Learning Development Plans.

Net recurrent expenditure by all LEAs in England for adult education.

£000

	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97
Corporation of London	40	72	69	221	322
Camden	2,470	1,383	1,178	1,144	1,037
Greenwich	3,891	3,822	1,837	1,935	1,812
Hackney	3,527	2,481	1,604	688	888
Hammersmith and Fulham	3,111	2,757	1,330	1,052	1,008
Islington	2,741	937	931	809	326
Kensington and Chelsea	1,096	950	910	898	845
Lambeth	4,235	3,831	4,189	2,668	2,250
Lewisham	3,260	1,322	1,837	1,394	1,749
Southwark	1,953	1,898	—	—	—
Tower Hamlets	1,806	2,301	2,530	1,850	1,064
Wandsworth	4,402	2,327	2,329	21,95	1,266
City of Westminster	3,511	2,214	2,262	1,843	1,514
Barking and Dagenham	659	742	740	714	763
Barnet	—	554	448	448	508
Bexley	843	548	454	578	534
Brent	1,843	1,088	1,731	1,083	1,316
Bromley	442	716	900	863	898
Croydon	2,080	1,918	1,203	1,183	1,274
Ealing	768	242	244	236	176
Enfield	144	282	126	34	54
Haringey	—	281	52	202	198
Harrow	—	—	—	—	—
Havering	454	162	151	89	50
Hillingdon	941	327	357	268	379
Hounslow	1,723	614	538	1,040	442
Kingston upon Thames	1,087	909	853	196	376
Merton	601	545	531	477	519
Newham	—	—	—	—	—
Redbridge	765	493	499	570	574
Richmond upon Thames	1,794	1,213	1,059	1,243	713
Sutton	9	1,556	1,614	948	1,012
Waltham Forest	1,637	1,249	1,496	979	1,350
Birmingham	4,351	2,595	3,021	2,550	2,540
Coventry	—	167	—	—	2,174
Dudley	205	633	856	622	603
Sandwell	914	406	605	407	429
Solihull	369	331	296	173	110
Walsall	943	1,565	919	53	54
Wolverhampton	1,246	648	720	638	724
Knowsley	65	—	2	—	171
Liverpool	2,461	3,459	2,722	4,308	2,932
St. Helens	162	—	7	21	18
Sefton	320	197	209	160	194
Wirral	—	687	613	578	772
Bolton	1,940	1,298	1,273	1,212	1,193
Bury	1,767	700	795	600	683
Manchester	5,429	4,149	2,788	2,517	2,535
Oldham	2,923	1,773	1,678	1,081	1,095
Rochdale	1,987	1,410	146	142	140
Salford	—	—	—	—	—
Stockport	1,026	606	710	301	335
Tameside	79	67	2	—	83
Trafford	—	128	60	110	42
Wigan	249	481	348	159	131
Barnsley	311	543	485	806	757
Doncaster	—	—	—	—	—
Rotherham	—	—	—	—	—
Sheffield	759	1,190	2,210	2,196	2,086
Bradford	—	—	—	—	—
Calderdale	1,188	998	844	606	443
Kirklees	896	801	325	450	361
Leeds	11,368	4,807	6,109	6,418	815
Wakefield	—	561	802	384	244
Gateshead	—	86	134	115	73
Newcastle upon Tyne	239	1,698	1,979	863	502
North Tyneside	1,483	589	1,132	1,182	1,244
South Tyneside	107	349	351	296	321
Sunderland	398	355	89	51	3
Isles of Scilly	—	—	—	—	—
Avon	1,530	2,227	1,977	2,257	n/a
Bath and North East Somerset	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	124

Net recurrent expenditure by all LEAs in England for adult education.

£000

	1992–93	1993–94	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97
City of Bristol	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	488
North Somerset	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	125
Hartlepool	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	276
Middlesborough	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	276
South Gloucestershire	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	259
Redcar and Cleveland	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	344
Stockton on Tees	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	456
City of Kingston upon Hull	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	614
East Riding of Yorkshire	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	357
Bedfordshire	2,917	1,562	1,633	1,432	1,353
Berkshire	893	3,037	3,244	2,582	2,619
Buckinghamshire	1,580	1,233	2,358	1,899	3,088
Cambridgeshire	2,378	1,741	1,974	1,123	523
Cheshire	887	1,311	1,329	1,307	1,212
Cleveland	1,441	1,291	2,150	21,77	n/a
Cornwall	1,392	1,445	1,455	1,084	758
Cumbria	673	1,881	823	709	1,108
Derbyshire	1,293	4,062	3,638	2,974	3,465
Devon	2,394	1,393	2,414	1,870	2,468
Dorset	2,078	720	589	446	525
Durham	611	451	386	139	56
East Sussex	577	975	1,216	1,233	970
Essex	4,845	995	1,347	1,746	—
Gloucestershire	—	1,702	2,039	1,497	1,380
Hampshire	2,955	1,734	3,638	2,608	32
Hereford and Worcester	—	966	—	99	114
Hertfordshire	—	1,974	2,189	705	962
Humberside	4,251	4,904	2,822	3,051	n/a
Isle of Wight	62	140	99	45	48
Kent	4,581	4,241	5,026	3,842	4,639
Lancashire	1,131	3,377	3,353	3,099	3,047
Leicestershire	8,574	8,419	6,732	4,012	4,143
Lincolnshire	1,356	1,146	1,252	1,130	1,145
North Lincolnshire	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	336
North East Lincolnshire	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	337
Norfolk	1,728	1,586	1,075	963	1,047
City of York	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	65
North Yorkshire	1,124	1,937	2,609	1,355	1,107
Northamptonshire	1,654	2,680	1,406	1,284	1,333
Northumberland	383	3	21	—	5
Nottinghamshire	209	1,792	2,600	3,657	2,787
Oxfordshire	1,866	1,774	1,783	1,202	1,289
Shropshire	408	1,288	1,241	637	539
Somerset	2,475	2,960	2,914	2,047	1,866
Staffordshire	654	1,312	1,334	1,165	1,203
Suffolk	657	420	415	341	319
Surrey	5,195	4,132	4,112	3,679	3,622
Warwickshire	—	154	519	469	638
West Sussex	1,026	1,437	1,150	1,157	1,156
Wiltshire	69	50	6	18	31

Learning Direct Service

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what has been the total cost to date of setting up the Learning Direct Service; what will be the budget allocation for learning direct in each of the next three years; and where the resources will come from. [61827]

Mr. Mudie: The total cost to date of setting up and operating Learning Direct is £1 million in 1997–98 and estimated to be £3.3 million in 1998–99. The budget for 1999–2000 will be £6.3 million. We plan to announce the figures for the following two years in the Department for Education and Employment Report which is due to be published in the spring. Expenditure will be from a specific Learning Direct subhead.

Higher and Further Education

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to resolve the current dispute between FE staff and their employers. [61810]

Mr. Mudie: I understand that the Association of Colleges and the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education continue to discuss the issues between them. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would urge all concerned to find a constructive way forward at a time when further education is set to benefit from the major additional investment of £725 million funding over the next two years which he announced last week.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received concerning the impact on external institutions of the FEFC's proposed merger of access and childcare funds; and what plans he has to ensure that external institutions are not disadvantaged by these changes. [61926]

Mr. Mudie: The new arrangements for further education student support, and an extra £67 million of new funding over the next two years, were announced by the Secretary of State on 26 November. These arrangements will include a very significant increase in the funding available through the FE Access Fund and funding specifically for the FEFC to augment its support for childcare provision. Attention will be paid to the position of external institutions when the detail of the new arrangements is worked up with the FEFC.

Key Stages

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what investigations he has conducted into the *(a)* lateness and *(b)* inaccuracy of some Key Stage Two, Three and Four data; and if he will make a statement. [62356]

Ms Estelle Morris: My Department and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority have carried out a through review of the problems that occurred in the production of the Key Stage 2 and 3 results. The recommendations of the review are now being implemented to ensure that similar problems do not occur in 1999. Data for pupils at the end of compulsory schooling were published to schedule in the secondary school performance tables on 1 December. All published data are at least as accurate as in previous years.

Teachers

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women became teachers in the maintained school sector in (i) primary and (ii) secondary schools in each year since 1970. [62030]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information available is shown in the following table.

New entrants to full-time teaching in the maintained nursery, primary and secondary sector in England and Wales

Year ending 21 March	*Maintained nursery and primary*		*Maintained secondary*		*Total*[1]	
	Men	*Women*	*Men*	*Women*	*Men*	*Women*
1997	1,310	8,940	3,750	5,820	5,070	14,760
1996	1,360	8,790	3,800	5,650	5,160	14,440
1995	1,350	8,840	4,130	5,840	5,480	14,680
1994	1,220	8,150	3,810	5,260	5,030	13,410
1993	1,090	7,650	3,360	4,780	4,450	12,430
1992	1,140	7,580	2,990	4,400	4,130	11,980
1991	1,120	7,270	3,010	4,290	4,130	11,560
1990	1,140	7,160	3,020	4,240	4,160	11,400
1989	980	6,250	2,800	4,040	3,780	10,290
1988	820	5,670	2,610	3,760	3,420	9,430
1987	640	4,750	2,930	4,400	3,560	9,150
1986	550	3,970	3,020	4,270	3,560	8,240
1985	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	3,590	7,550
1984	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	4,240	8,570
1983	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	4,730	8,540
1982	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	4,840	8,360
1981	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	5,490	10,790
1980	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	6,900	14,760
1979	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	8,030	17,470
1978	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	7,880	14,560
1977	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	9,220	16,870
1976	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	11,860	22,880
1975	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	13,000	26,740
1974	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	13,720	27,390
1973	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	12,780	26,600
1972	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	12,130	26,420
1971	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	11,330	25,650
1970	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	[2]—	10,290	23,550

[1] Constituent parts may not add to totals due to rounding

[2] n/a—not available

Notes:

1. Entrants to sixth form colleges are excluded from 1994 onwards.
2. New entrants are those recorded as in service at 31 March of the year shown who had no known service recorded at 31 March of the previous year.

Grammar Schools

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the numbers of children who left state primary schools in 1997 from the boroughs of *(a)* Islington, *(b)* Camden, *(c)* Kensington and Chelsea, *(d)* Hammersmith and Fulham and *(e)* Westminster to enter (i) fee-paying and (ii) selective grammar schools. [62024]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Music Funding

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how music service funding will be protected in the proposed delegation of funding to schools scheduled for April 1999, with particular reference to the Bexley Centre for Music and Dance. [62531]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Government recognise the important contribution made by LEA music services; that is why we proposed new arrangements to safeguard them in our "Fair Funding" consultation document.

We will be making an announcement on the future funding of LEA music services in the near future.

National Training Organisations

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the current national training organisations by name, sector and number of employees covered. [62398]

Mr. Mudie: A list of the National Training Organisations by sector and employees is shown in the table.

	Training organisations		*Number of employees*
1.	Association for Ceramic Training and Development	Production of ceramic goods	37,800
2.	Bakery Training Council	Manufacture, distribution and retail in the baking industry	125,000
3.	Banks and Building Societies NTO	Banks and building societies	460,000
4.	Board for Education and Training in the Water Industry	Water services and supply companies	48,000
5.	British Plumbing Employers' Council (Training) Ltd.	Plumbing and mechanical services	250,000
6.	British Ports Industry Training Ltd.	Ports, terminals, stevedoring companies, contract labour suppliers (for the Ports Industry)	25,000
7.	CAPITB	Apparel and leathergoods manufacture	160,000
8.	Chemical and Manufacturing Processing NTO	Primary chemical manufacture and processing, manufacture of soaps and detergents	250,000
9.	Cleaning & Support Services NTO	Carpet and upholstery cleaning, caretaking and portering services, industrial, hospital, commercial and domestic cleaning, facilities management	843,300
10.	Community Justice NTO	Probation, youth justice, crime prevention and community safety	26,700
11.	Construction Industry Training Board	Construction industry	1,167,000
12.	Council for Administration	All sector—administration staff	—
13.	Custodial care	Prisons and other remand organisations	50,000
14.	Institute of Customer Service	All sector—customer service staff	—
15.	The Cultural Heritage NTO	The cultural heritage, in the public and private sectors, including museums, galleries and a range of organisations concerned with the conservation and interpretation of the material and built heritage	41,000
16.	Dairy Training & Development Council	Dairy sector	45,000
17.	Distributive NTO	Warehousing and distribution, retail, dry-cleaning and laundry work, paper wholesalers and post office workers	4,312,760
18.	National Training Organisation for Early Years	Childminders, nursery nurses, nannies, playgroup leaders and assistants, classroom assistants, staff in private nurseries and foster carers of under eights	427,000

	Training organisations		Number of employees
19.	Electricity Training Association	Electricity supply industry, also nuclear decommissioning	115,000
20.	Electronics & Software Services NTO	Services provided to business to help implement and exploit business technology, including consultancy, IT services, user training, maintenance, call management	350,000
21.	Employment NTO	All sector—Training and development staff/managers/personnel. F/T trade union officials, health and safety officers	—
22.	Engineering and Marine Training Authority (EMTA)	Engineering manufacture	1,787,000
23.	Engineering Construction Industry Training Board (ECITB)	Engineering construction	40,900
24.	Engineering Services Training Trust Ltd.	Heating, ventilating, air conditioning and refrigeration (HVACR)	79,000
25.	EPIC (Extractive and Mineral Processing Industries NTO)	Quarry products, china and ball clay, silica and industrial sands	39,000
26.	Further Education National Training Organisation	College staff	250,000
27.	Food and Drink NTO	Food and drink manufacture	500,000
28.	Gas Industry NTO	Shipping and supply of natural gas pipelines and associated measurement and control equipment. Installation, maintenance and servicing of gas burning equipment and appliances, offshore gas burning equipment and appliances, processing and storage facilities	156,000
29.	Glass Training Ltd.	Automotive, container, flat, fibre, scientific and tableware glass	28,200
30.	Hairdressing and Beauty Industry Authority	Hairdressing, beauty therapy, nail technology	225,000
31.	Health Care NTO	Health care	970,100
32.	Hospitality Training Foundation	Hospitality industry: e.g. hotels, pubs/bars/clubs, restaurants	2,033,000
33.	Housing National Training Organisation	Housing	150,000
34.	Information Technology National Training Organisation	IT users and supply side practitioners, practitioners in corporate and public sector	683,000
35.	Insurance and Related Financial Service NTO	Insurance and related financial services	350,000
36.	Languages NTO	All sector—translators, interpreters	—
37.	LANTRA NTO Ltd.	Landbased industry plus lift trucks and floristry	1,389,000
38.	Local Government NTO	Local Government—public (consumer) protection, highways, maintenance and emergency fire service	2,080,300
39.	Management & Enterprise Training Organisation	All sector—represents small firms and management	—
40.	Meat Training Council	Meat and poultry industry, manufacturers and processors, wholesalers, independents and multiples (retail)	170,000
41.	METIER	Visual arts/crafts, performing arts, arts development and teaching, literature arts, arts, arts managements and administration, technical support and performance design	615,800
42.	Motor Industry Training Council	Retail motor industry and allied sectors	503,700
43.	National Electrotechnical Training	Electrical installation engineering plus allied trades (Electrotechnical sector)	172,000
44.	OPITO (The NTO for the Oil and Gas Extraction Industry)	Oil and gas extraction (includes—drilling, processing/transfer, servicing operations)	30,000
45.	Paper Education & Training Council	All paper manufacture, tissue/recovered paper, allied trades and fibre content	78,200
46.	Passenger Transport Forum for Employee Development	Land (road) passenger transport	148,000
47.	Petroleum Industry NTO	Downstream petroleum, refining and distribution	91,000
48.	Pharmaceuticals Industry NTO	Pharmaceutical industry	80,000
49.	Polymer & Associated Industries NTO	Polymer processing, signmaking, man-made fibres (from 15.9.98)	317,000
50.	Print & Graphic Communication NTO	Traditional printing, printing in new media formats, screen printing, book binding	193,400
51.	Rail Industry Training Council	Rail industry, freight operations, engineering and heritage companies	130,300
52.	Refractories & Building Products Training Council	Refractories and ceramic materials, clayware (including clay bricks, pipes, drainage, chimneys, floor tiles), precast concrete	23,200
53.	Road Haulage and Distribution Training Council	Road transport and freight, storage, post and courier services	600,000
54.	Science, Technology & Mathematics NTO	All sector—Scientists, technologists and mathematicians	—
55.	Seafish Training	Sea fishing, fish merchanting and processing, fish mongering, fish frying	104,000
56.	Security Industry Training Organisation	Guarding, investigating, security management	308,000
57.	Skillset	Broadcast, film, video and multi-media	190,000
58.	NTO for Sport, Recreation & Allied Occupants	Sport and recreation, playwork, outdoor education and development training, exercise and fitness, synthetic surface installers and play equipment manufacturers and installation	212,000
59.	Steel Industry NTO	The steel industry, metals, recycling, iron and steel making, shaping and forming through hot and cold processing, forging, wire drawing, tube making, finishing, stockholding, constructional steelwork	97,600

	Training organisations		Number of employees
60.	Telecommunications Vocational Standards Council	Fixed wire public and private communications—CATV, Mobile public and private communications-military and marine communications, call handling	1,646,000
61.	The Higher Education Training Organisation	Everyone employed in a university including lecturers	173,600
62.	Training Alliance for Surface Coatings	Paint, printing inks, wallcoverings and powder coatings	20,500
63.	Training Organisation for Personal Social Services	Personal social services—social work, social care, resident home staff, day centre staff, foster carers	1,237,000
64.	Thento Ltd.	Leisure and business travel, tour operators, tourist information centres, representatives/travel couriers	130,000
65.	Voluntary Sector NTO	All sector—all unpaid workers and those paid staff working in charitable organisations	—

Note:
1. The employee figures for the All-Sector NTOs are included in the appropriate sector NTO figures.
2. These are approximate figures provided by the organisation themselves.

WALES

Rough Sleepers

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the amounts of funding allocated by the Welsh Office for rough sleepers' initiatives in Wales for winter *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99. [62641]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: £314,000 was paid in grant for projects to help rough sleepers in 1997–98. Of this £32,000 was for schemes to provide support over the winter period. All eligible bids were met.

£350,000 has been allocated for rough sleeping projects in the current year. Local authorities, working with the voluntary sector, have been invited to submit bids by 14 December for grants to provide further assistance over this winter.

European Forum Report

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if it is his intention to publish the report drawn up by the European Forum on Wales and the European Union; and if he will make a statement. [62394]

Mr. Michael: I shall arrange for the Report to be published as soon as possible.

National Assembly

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what quality control measures he plans to put in place for the design and construction of the National Assembly. [62260]

Mr. Michael: The building and material performance criteria were specified in the Design Concept Brief used for the design competition. The selected Architect will now proceed to produce a building specification working in partnership with a Management Contractor to be appointed under EU procurement rules. This will establish the quality of materials and workmanship to be provided. Ensuring those standards are met will be the responsibility of the Project Manager in conjunction with the Management Contractor. Welsh Office officials will continue to maintain overall control of the project by means of regular progress meetings and site inspections.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Schools

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will publish *(a)* details of those schools presently under consideration as major capital expenditure projects by the Department of Education for Northern Ireland, *(b)* the estimated cost at each school and *(c)* the date on which DENI accepted that each school satisfied the criteria for category 1, 2 or 3 status. [61837]

Mr. McFall: There are over 200 major works projects on the Schools Capital Priorities Planning List and I will write to the hon. Gentleman giving details of these schemes and place a copy in the Library of the House. Estimated costs are not available for many of the schemes which are at a very early stage of planning or where planning has been suspended.

There are 125 projects in priority categories 1, 2 and 3. All projects in these categories have received approval to take forward detailed planning. Information is not readily available about the dates each project entered the Planning List and this could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

ME

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what level of funding will be made available by the Department of Health and Social Services in 1999 to provide a regional support office in Northern Ireland for myalgic encephalomyelitis sufferers and their carers. [61836]

Mr. McFall: I refer the hon. Gentleman to the reply I gave to the hon. Member for Belfast, South (Rev. Martin Smyth) on 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *200*.

Petroleum Products

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the terms of the contract established by the Western Education and Library Board in 1998 for the purchase of petroleum products in the Irish Republic. [61919]

Mr. McFall: A contract for the provision of fuel products was awarded by the Western Education and Library Board to Diesel Card Ireland Limited following open competitive tendering procedure. The contract is for the period 1 September 1998 to 31 August 1999; and its total value is £46,500 (Irish) for the provision of some 117,500 litres of fuel.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is the policy of the Government on the purchase by Government departments and agencies in Northern Ireland of petroleum products in the Republic of Ireland. [61920]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Government Departments and their Agencies in Northern Ireland buy fuel under EC compliant contractual arrangements which have been established by the Buying Agency in Great Britain in collaboration with the Government Purchasing Agency, Northern Ireland.

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many representations she has received in 1998 about the smuggling of petroleum products into Northern Ireland from the Irish Republic; and if she will make a statement. [61923]

Mr. Ingram: The Secretary of State has received several representations about this matter and these have been referred to the various agencies concerned.

It is recognised that is a serious problem in revenue terms and disadvantages legitimate traders, and my Department together with the RUC and HM Customs and Excise are developing a co-ordinated and intelligence driven strategy to address this issue.

Punishment Shootings and Beatings

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many *(a)* punishment beatings and *(b)* punishment shootings took place in Northern Ireland in the weeks ending (i) 14 November, (ii) 21 November and (iii) 28 November; and how many in each category in each period were committed by (1) Loyalists and (2) Republicans. [61838]

Mr. Ingram: The table shows the number of casualties as a result of paramilitary style attacks for the three-week period 8 November to 28 November 1998:

	Shootings		*Assaults*	
Date	*By Loyalist*	*By Republican*	*By Loyalist*	*By Republican*
8 November-14 November	0	0	2	1
15 November-21 November	1	0	0	0
22 November-28 November	1	1	2	2
Totals	2	1	4	3

Finbarr Ross

Mr. Trimble: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made to date in respect of the application to the United States authorities for the extradition of Finbarr Ross to Northern Ireland to answer charges related to the collapse of International Investments Ltd. (Gibraltar). [62105]

Marjorie Mowlam: Mr. Ross was arrested in the United States in March this year. His extraditions was ordered on 14 April. Mr. Ross appealed to the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals, which heard his case on 19 November.

Peace Process

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what assessment she has made of the current state of the Peace Process; and if she will make a statement. [62196]

Mr. Paul Murphy *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Considerable progress has been made in implementing the Belfast Agreement including elections to the new Assembly and the election of a First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Reviews of policing and criminal justice are also underway. New initiatives for victims have been announced. The Northern Ireland Act 1998 is now law and work on establishing the Human Rights Commission and Equality Commission has commenced. Security measures are being reduced appropriately and the early release scheme is operational. In addition a wide range of related preparatory work is also under way both within Government and the Assembly to prepare for the formal transfer of power to the Assembly next year. An important element of this is the present consultations on the number of Ministerial offices and on areas for North/South co-operation. I look forward to agreement on these and the full implementation of all aspects of the Agreement together with the launch of the various new institutions early in 1999.

CABINET OFFICE

Information Warfare

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will place in the Library copies of the speeches to be made by Cabinet Office officials David Fisher and Edna Chivers to the conference on information warfare to be held at the Royal United Services Institute on 2 December. [61672]

Mr. Kilfoyle: I am pleased to confirm that copies of these speeches will be placed in the Library of the House.

Meetings (Liberal Democrats)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many meetings he has had since 11 November with the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed (Mr. Beith) in connection with the statement made on that date by the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Liberal Democrats; how long each meeting lasted; and how many are planned to be held. [61644]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: I have had one meeting with the right hon. Member for Berwick-upon-Tweed to discuss our review of the work of the Joint Consultative Committee. It took place on 12 November and lasted approximately one hour. We plan to have at least one further meeting.

Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what role he has in the determination of the Liberal Democrat membership of the Cabinet Joint Consultative Committee. [61645]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: None.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Growth Promoters

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what changes the European Commission is proposing to the authorisations currently in force concerning the use of low-level antibiotics as growth promoters in animal feed; and if he will make a statement. [62294]

Mr. Rooker: The Commission has proposed the suspension of four antibiotic growth promoters, bacitracin zinc, spiramycin, virginiamycin and tylosin phosphate, with effect from 1 January 1999. There would be provision allowing Member States not to operate the suspension until 30 June 1999. The suspension would be re-examined before 31 December 2000 following the results of monitoring for antibiotic resistance in farm animals.

The proposal failed to achieve a qualified majority in favour at the Commission's Standing Committee on Animal Nutrition on 2 December. It is therefore likely to be presented to the Agriculture Council on 14/15 December.

Marketing Co-operatives

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is taking to encourage the establishment of marketing co-operatives in the agricultural sector. [62190]

Mr. Rooker: I wish to encourage all forms of collaborative marketing, not just co-operatives.

My noble Friend, Lord Donoughue, and Ben Gill, President of the National Farmers' Union, launched a major MAFF and NFU initiative to stimulate interest in collaborative marketing on 29 November, at the Royal Smithfield Show.

The benefits of collaboration for our primary producers include increased scale, of the kind demanded by today's big customers; access to professional marketing, technical and administrative support; cohesive negotiating ability; improved supply chain communication; and the many other benefits that come through bigger businesses.

Over the coming months the NFU will hold some 36 focus group discussions around the country both to highlight these benefits to producers and to identify barriers to producer involvement. Key issues identified will, if appropriate, be addressed through the MAFF seminar programme. There will also be a number of open days at successful farmer controlled businesses, next Spring. We aim to report progress at next year's Royal Show.

Over-30-months Scheme

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to review the over thirty months scheme; and if he will make a statement. [62189]

Mr. Rooker: The Over Thirty Months Scheme is an EU scheme, the rules of which are set by the European Commission. The Spongiform Encephalopathy Advisory Committee have identified criteria against which the controls on beef over thirty months of age can be reviewed in the future and hope to begin to address this at the meeting planned for March 1999. The Committee recognises that this will require careful study and will almost certainly need to be considered over several meetings. In the light of the Committee's conclusions, and after consultation with all interested parties, the Government will consider what changes to the scheme (if any) could be made consistent with the continued protection of public health and which they might then recommend to the Commission for its consideration.

Milk Quota

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many holders of milk quota were not using that quota for their own production in *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1997–98 and *(c)* 1996–97. [62191]

Mr. Rooker: According to the quota register maintained by the Intervention Board Executive Agency, in 1996–97 4,685 quota holders out of a total of 38,185 milk quota holders leased out all their milk quota rather than producing against it. Similarly in 1997–98, 5,284 out of 37,087 quota holders leased out all their quota. There are no figures available, as yet, for the 1998–99 quota year.

Veterinary Research

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the financial support given by the Government for veterinary research for each of the last five years. [62112]

Mr. Rooker: We have provided financial support for veterinary research over the last five financial years as follows:

£ million

Year	*Amount*
1993–94	24.4
1994–95	23.9
1995–96	24.3
1996–97	25.5
1997–98	27.9

The research has underpinned our policies on animal welfare and protection, diseases of animals, meat hygiene and public health, transmissible spongiform encephalopathies, veterinary medicines and brucellosis and TB eradication.

Slaughterhouse Owners

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans the Government have to give financial assistance to slaughterhouse owners. [62320]

Mr. Rooker: None.

Animal Foodstuffs Advisory Committee

Ms Shipley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when the Advisory Committee on Animal Foodstuffs *(a)* was set up and *(b)* plans to meet. [61193]

Mr. Rooker: The Ministry has now completed an extensive consultation exercise on the remit of the Committee and sought nominations for its membership.

We are moving ahead as quickly as possible, whilst at the same time working to the Nolan principles. Accordingly, the selection and appointment of chairman and members will be based on merit, openness and equal opportunity. The Committee is likely to have its first meeting by the middle of next year, considerably in advance of the Food Standards Agency being established.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 8 December 1998

HOME DEPARTMENT

Women Prisoners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many women held in prisons in England and Wales on 1 November had a child or children with them. [62022]

Mr. George Howarth: On 1 November 1998, 53 women had their babies with them in the four mother and baby units in the female prison estate.

Mr. Farrakhan

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to make a final decision on the application of Mr. Farrakhan to visit the United Kingdom. [62285]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Earlier this year, my right hon. Friend carried out a full review of Mr. Farrakhan's exclusion from the United Kingdom. My right hon. Friend was minded to continue the exclusion, but invited representations to be made. Those representations are being given careful consideration and we expect to take a final decision shortly.

Asylum and Immigration

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many asylum seekers have been convicted of offences punishable with imprisonment in the last year for which figures are available; [62212]

(2) how many asylum seekers have been *(a)* excluded and *(b)* deported from the United Kingdom as a result of the commission of crime in another country in the last year for which figures are available; [62206]

(3) how many asylum applicants have been ordered to be deported as a result of the commission of criminal offences in the United Kingdom in the last year for which figures are available. [62205]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Information is not held centrally on the number of asylum seekers who have committed offences in another country or on the number of asylum seekers convicted of offences punishable with imprisonment and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

During 1997, 366 persons were recommended for deportation by a court and 89 were served with deportation notices on the basis that their continued presence in the United Kingdom was not conducive to the public good. These figures include asylum and non-asylum cases.

The system we inherited for identifying asylum seekers who have offended requires the police and prison service to inform the Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) when someone subject to immigration control is convicted of any offence against the person, any drugs offence or any immigration offence or any other offence where a sentence of imprisonment of 12 months or more is imposed. In addition IND is notified where a court recommends that an offender should be deported. Other offences may be reported but there is no requirement for this to be done.

This system produced records which showed that, in 1997, 14 persons who applied for asylum at some stage were recommended for deportation by a court and a further four were issued with notices of intention to deport on grounds conducive to the public good following conviction for a criminal offence. The current records are likely to under-estimate the numbers involved but it is difficult to assess by precisely how much. I have asked officials to re-examine and recommend improvements to the inherited process of collecting this data as part of our process of modernising the information systems in IND.

Prison Population

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the current prison population; and what it was in each of the last five years. [62380]

Mr. George Howarth: The information requested is given in the table.

Information on the average prison population in England and Wales is published in "Prison Statistics England and Wales" (table 1.4 of the 1997 edition, cm 4017) a copy of which is in the Library.

Population in Prisons in England and Wales 1993–98

Date/Year	*Number*
4 December 1998[1]	66,273
Annual averages	
1997	61,114
1996	55,281
1995	51,047
1994	48,794
1993	44,566

[1] Provisional figure

Prison Costs

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the present annual cost of keeping an inmate in a prison in England and Wales. [62379]

Mr. George Howarth: The average cost per prisoner in 1997–98 (based on the final outturn) was £23,006.

Animal Experiments

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total budget for the Animal Procedures Committee in each of the last five years; and what proportion of the budget in each year was allocated to sponsor research on alternatives to animal experimentation. [62389]

Mr. George Howarth: The Animal Procedures Committee does not have a budget. It advises on how the Home Office budget for sponsoring research into alternatives should be used. The Home Office also has a budget to reimburse the expenses of Committee members and, from this year, has a budget to remunerate the Chairman.

In each of the last five years, these budgets have totalled:

£000

Year	*Research*	*Expenses*	*Chairman's remuneration*
1998–99	259	20	10
1997–98	182	22	—
1996–97	242	17	—
1995–96	253	[1]—	—
1994–95	272	[1]—	—

[1] These figures are not available

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many animal procedures inspectors were *(a)* budgeted for and *(b)* in post in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [62487]

Mr. George Howarth: The number of inspectors in post and the total number of posts at 31 December in each of the last five years are as follows:

Year	*Inspectors in post*	*Inspectorate posts*
1997	18	[1]18
1996	17	18
1995	18	18
1994	19	19
1993	20	21

[1] Additional funding was secured during 1997 to increase the complement of the Inspectorate to 21 during financial year 1998–99.

There are currently 21 inspectors in post.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he has taken to implement each of the recommendations made in the Animal Procedures Committee interim report on the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986. [62486]

Mr. George Howarth: I refer the hon. Member to pages 40–42 of the Report of the Animal Procedures Committee for 1997, which was published and laid in the Library on 26 November 1998.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he is taking to ensure that animals are used in scientific procedures only where justified; and what additional restrictions have been introduced since 1 May 1997. [62388]

Mr. George Howarth: In addition to the progress outlined by my right hon. Friend, the Prime Minister, in a reply to the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Mr. Jones) on 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *473–74*, we recently announced that we had secured an end to the use of animals in the United Kingdom for the testing of cosmetics ingredients.

Project licence applications and ongoing work will continue to be carefully scrutinised by the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Inspectorate to ensure that programmes of work are justified, in the sense that:

the potential benefits outweigh the likely costs to the animals involved;

non-animal alternatives are used wherever possible; and

where animals have to be used, the least suffering is caused to the fewest number of animals of the lowest sentience.

The ethical review processes that will be required in all designated establishments from April 1999 will also have an important role to play in ensuring that animals can be used only when it is absolutely justified.

While the use of animals in many areas, especially medical research and testing, will continue to be necessary for the foreseeable future, we will continue to look for opportunities to eliminate types of animal use where suitable alternatives become available or where that use is no longer justified by the benefits that might accrue.

Dr. Palmer: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many project licences issued under the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 that are currently in force and involve the use of drugs have *(a)* mild, *(b)* moderate, *(c)* substantial and *(d)* unclassified security banding. [62374]

Mr. George Howarth: Aggregate information on whether project licences authorise the use of drugs—either research on drugs (including pharmaceuticals) or research involving drugs including those where analgesics or anaesthetics are used to reduce pain and suffering—could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

OECD Safety Tests

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he has taken to delete the LD50 test from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's list of regulatory safety tests. [62488]

Mr. George Howarth: Along with other member states of the European Union, we have pressed the European Commission to pursue this issue with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). We understand that the OECD will consider this once guidelines on the use of the alternatives to the LD50 test have been finalised.

Police National Computer

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list for each of the last three years *(a)* the number of accesses to each index of the police national computer and *(b)* the maximum and minimum number of entries in each index; and what is the current number of entries. [62319]

Mr. Boateng: I am advised that the number of transactions carried out in the last three years and the current number of entries on each application of the Police National Computer are shown in the following table. The maximum and minimum number of entries on each application is not recorded.

Number of transactions

Application	*[1]1995*	*[1]1996*	*January–March 1997*	*[2]1997–98*
Vehicles	25,400,639	26,271,565	6,841,519	28,228,526
Stolen Property	292,695	261,524	60,054	220,279
Names	20,598,101	24,533,793	6,654,447	27,735,256
Fingerprints	911,840	1,087,393	260,711	946,815
Comparative Case Analysis	298,742	419,408	134,260	495,620
Transaction Log	585,298	628,848	165,303	675,001
Other (e.g. Broadcast, Force/Station inquiry, Post Centre inquiry)	2,304,490	2,583,330	681,259	2,786,720
Total	50,391,805	55,786,861	14,797,553	61,088,217

[1] Data held on calendar year basis
[2] Data held on financial year basis

Current number of entries (as at 4 December 1998)

Application	*Number of entries*
Vehicles	46,899,574
Stolen Property	57,461
Names	5,912,064
Fingerprints	4,713,609
Comparative Case Analysis	9,249
Transaction Log	[1]63,959,077
Total	121,551,034

[1] Calendar year to date

Forgery

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons were *(a)* arrested for and *(b)* charged with offences contrary to section 1 of the Criminal Attempts Act 1981 or section 3 of the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981 at (i) Heathrow Airport and (ii) Gatwick Airport in each financial year since 1993–94. [62390]

Mr. Boateng: This information is not normally collected centrally. However, the Metropolitan police have been able to provide information on persons accused—that is, a count of persons arrested and subsequently proceeded against—and persons charged. The information relates to persons accused in the Heathrow division of attempting to commit a notifiable offence and those accused under section 3 and 4 of the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981. The information is shown in the table.

The information for Gatwick airport is not available as this would incur disproportionate cost since manual searches through individual records would be required.

Persons at Heathrow Airport	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Accused of attempting to commit a notifiable offence	[1]—	[1]—	201	232	206
Charged with the above	[1]—	[1]—	177	224	194
Accused of offences under Sections 3 and 4 of the Forgery and Counterfeiting Act 1981	14	46	50	43	66
Charged with the above	6	32	41	37	65

[1] Not available

Road Traffic Offences

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made over the last five years *(a)* within his Department, *(b)* in conjunction with other Government departments and *(c)* in conjunction with European bodies towards developing systems involving the use of new technology for safety-related road traffic law enforcement and the administration of penalties. [62543]

Mr. Boateng: Since 1 January 1994, we have type approved for police use 10 speed measuring devices which operate using the various technologies of radar, lasers or sensors across the road. The most recent available figures show that 34 per cent. of the speed offences dealt with by the police were detected by automatic cameras. For drink drive law enforcement we have also type approved 1 alcohol screening device for roadside use and 3 evidential breath alcohol testing instruments. Research is underway into possible devices to enable the police to screen for drugs driving offences at the roadside.

In 1996, the Police Research Group published a cost benefit study of police enforcement cameras, the findings of which encouraged the wider use of camera technology to reduce road casualties. Home Office scientists have published a number of technical specifications and standards for various technologies to assist manufacturers to meet the needs of law enforcement. A new technical specification for police vehicle livery has been designed to provide greater safety by improving the visibility of police vehicles.

Scientists at the Police Scientific Development Branch and Forensic Science Service continue to test systems developed by manufacturers with a view to their being type approved for police use. The Department is also supporting a project on the possible use of simulation technology for police driver training.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of road traffic offenders were sentenced to *(a)* a re-test and *(b)* an extended re-test for the offences of (i) causing death by dangerous driving and (ii) dangerous driving in each of the last three years. [62551]

Mr. Boateng: The readily available information relates to the percentage of findings of guilt for offences of causing death by dangerous driving (including causing death by careless driving under the influence of drink or drugs and causing death by aggravated vehicle taking) and dangerous driving, which resulted in a requirement to undertake a driving test in England and Wales in the years 1995 to 1997, and is as follows:

Findings of guilt for dangerous driving and causing death by dangerous driving etc. that resulted in a driving test requirement in England and Wales

	Causing death by dangerous driving etc.	*Dangerous driving*
1995		
Number	53	1,997
Percentage	16	31
1996		
Number	9	1,900
Percentage	3	33
1997[1]		
Number	84	3,458
Percentage	26	58

[1] Provisional

No information is available centrally to distinguish between re-tests and extended re-tests.

Illegal Tipping

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have been prosecuted and convicted of illegal tipping in each year since 1995. [62534]

Mr. Boateng: The information available from the Home Office court appearance database is given in the table. The offences shown are related to, but do not necessarily involve, illegal tipping.

Defendants proceeded against at magistrates' courts and found guilty at all courts for offences related to, but not necessarily involving, illegal tipping England and Wales 1995–97

Offence description	*1995*		*1996*		*1997*	
	Prosecutions	*Convictions*	*Prosecutions*	*Convictions*	*Prosecutions*	*Convictions*
Depositing, causing the deposition or permitting the deposition treating, keeping or disposing of controlled waste in or on land without a licence[1]	111	80	121	95	98	87
Depositing, causing the deposition or permitting the deposition of controlled special waste in or on land without a licence[2]	30	23	32	24	19	19
Handling, controlling or transferring controlled waste without taking reasonable measures. Failing to comply with the Secretary of State's requirements[3]	69	49	105	81	89	72
Contravening regulations of a waste management licence[4]	65	50	94	62	84	59
Failure to comply with Regulation 18 of the Special Waste Regulations 1996	[7]—	[7]—	[7]—	[7]—	[7]—	[7]—
Abandoning items on any land without lawful authority[5]	98	79	77	57	78	65
Transporting controlled waste in the course of a business or otherwise with a view to profit without registering as a carrier[6]	21	15	11	10	9	6

[1] Environmental Protection Act 1990, sec 33(8)
[2] Environmental Protection Act 1990, sec 33(9)
[3] Environmental Protection Act 1990, sec 34
[4] Environmental Protection Act 1990, sec 33(6)
[5] Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act 1978, sec 2
[6] Control of Pollution (Amendment) Act 1989, sec 1
[7] Not applicable
Source:
Home Office Court Proceedings Database

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *132–33*, if he will define the general principles of fairness which will guide his handling of representations and the exercise of his discretion in deciding the question of whether or not to issue an authority to proceed in the case of Senator Pinochet. [62644]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The general principles of fairness, which I shall be following, are those laid down by law. Moreover, I shall explain the reasons for my decision.

Prisoner Suicides

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prison inmates in England and Wales have committed suicide since 1 January. [62595]

Mr. George Howarth: As at 7 December 1998, there have been 74 self-inflicted deaths of prisoners in establishments in England and Wales since 1 January 1998. Of the 23 inquests held, 18 verdicts of suicide have been recorded.

Channel Islands (Taxation)

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the powers of Her Majesty's Government to seek to impose taxes on the Channel Islands, with particular reference to the proposed EU withholding tax. [62515]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The Channel Islands are not subject to European Union instruments on taxation, such as the proposed Directive on the taxation of savings. The Explanatory Memorandum to the proposed Directive, however, encourages member states to apply the measures contained in the Directive to their dependent territories within the framework of their constitutional arrangements. Legislation on taxation matters has always taken the form of laws enacted by the Island legislatures.

Xenotransplantation

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to publish the code of practice on the welfare of xenotransplantation source animals; what groups, companies and individuals he has consulted on this code; and if he will make a statement. [62427]

Mr. George Howarth: I cannot give a date for publication at this time. Work on the code is progressing, but it can be finalised only once we have received confirmation—from the United Kingdom Xenotransplantation Interim Regulatory Authority (UKXIRA)—of the health status requirements for animals intended for clinical use. Home Office officials met members of the UKXIRA biosecurity steering group on 26 November to discuss these matters.

Officials have also consulted with the Department of Health, the British Laboratory Animal Veterinary Association, the Laboratory Animal Science Association, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, the Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, the British Veterinary Association, the Pig Veterinary Society and Imutran. The code must be submitted to the Animal Procedures Committee for its consideration before it is published.

Manslaughter and Murder

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the average penalty applied to a person convicted of *(a)* manslaughter and *(b)* murder in each of the last five years. [62421]

Mr. Boateng: The information available from the Home Office court appearance database is given in the table.

Average sentence lengths[1] for people convicted of murder or manslaughter at the Crown Court, 1993–97
England and Wales

Months

Offence	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Murder[2]	All convicted people were sentenced to life				
Attempted murder	99.3	98.7	111.5	115.8	98.0
Manslaughter	62.2	57.6	58.0	60.9	62.0
Manslaughter due to diminished responsibility	57.3	57.4	56.0	61.0	74.4

[1] Based on custodial sentences excluding life. Covers unsuspended imprisonment, imprisonment in a young offender institution and detention under the Children and Young Persons Act 1933, sec. 53(2)

[2] Murder has a mandatory sentence of life

Jury Trials

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reform the system of trial by jury. [61249]

Mr. Boateng: We have published two consultation papers this year about jury trials. The first paper, on use of juries in serious fraud trials, invited views on the principle of whether the system is likely to operate better and with a greater degree of public confidence if, in a small number of complex fraud trials, a traditional jury were to be replaced by another method of determining the facts. The consultation paper on determining the mode of trial considered whether defendants should be able to choose to be tried by a jury in cases which magistrates have indicated that they would be content to hear. We are currently considering the responses to these two consultation exercises.

Criminal Prosecutions

Mr. Corbyn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to reform the law relating to the mounting of private criminal prosecutions. [61261]

Mr. Boateng: I have no such plans, although the issue will fall to be considered in the context of the Law Commission's recommendations in its recent report on Consents to Prosecution.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what steps he has taken to ensure that police stations' computers are millennium compliant; how much money has been allocated to this; what percentage of this has been given to Taskforce 2000; and if he will make a statement. [62410]

Mr. Boateng: It is for each police force to assess the likely impact of the Millennium Bug on its information technology systems. All forces have conducted audits of their Information Technology and communications systems, and will have contingency plans to ensure the continuation of critical business areas. Forces are expected to meet the costs of this exercise from within existing budgets.

Taskforce 2000 receives no funding from central Government. However, the Government have funded Action 2000, established last year to advise United Kingdom industry and the public on tackling the Millennium Bug.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Canavan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many asylum seekers are currently being detained in Scotland; and how many in each place of detention. [62903]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: As at 30 November 1998, 24 people were held under Immigration Act powers in Scottish penal establishments. All of them had claimed asylum at some stage.

The number in each place of detention is as follows:

Her Majesty's Prison, Inverness: 2

Her Majesty's Prison, Aberdeen: 10

Her Majesty's Prison, Edinburgh: 6

Her Majesty's Prison, Gateside: 5

Her Majesty's Prison, Perth: 1.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what estimate he has made of the number of pre-July 1993 asylum applicants with a criminal conviction resulting in a sentence of less than 12 months' imprisonment who will benefit from the backlog procedure; [63057]

(2) pursuant to the answer of 3 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *249*, if every case involving the commission of a criminal offence by an asylum seeker is notified to the Immigration and Nationality Directorate. [63098]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Information is not held centrally on the number of asylum seekers who have been convicted of offences punishable with imprisonment and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

As outlined in the White Paper, "Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum", where an asylum application was made before the coming into force on 1 July 1993 of the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993, delay in itself will normally be considered so serious as to justify, as a matter of fairness, the grant of indefinite leave to remain.

This will not apply, however, to applicants whose presence here is not conducive to the public good, for example on the basis of their conviction for a serious criminal offence. In general, any offender receiving a custodial sentence of 12 months or more will be excluded from benefiting from the backlog procedure. Other offenders may be excluded if their record is serious enough. Nor will it apply to any application for asylum made after the commencement of removal or deportation action against the applicant.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Electoral Boundaries

Mr. McLoughlin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he plans to implement the Local Government Commission recommendations for electoral boundaries for Amber Valley and Derbyshire Dales before the local elections in May 1999. [62226]

Mr. Raynsford: No. Our policy is to make electoral change orders by no later than the October before the May election date on which the changes come into effect so as to allow sufficient preparatory time including compiling the Electoral Register. The final reports on the Derbyshire Districts were not presented to the Department until 24 November 1998.

Electric Cars

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many grants the Energy Savings Trust has approved for conversion to electric cars; [62387]

(2) how many of the grants awarded by the Energy Savings Trust for conversion to electric cars have been to *(a)* UK-based and *(b)* overseas-based companies. [62385]

Mr. Meacher: The Energy Savings Trust has received no applications for grants for conversion to electric cars, but has provided grant funding to two UK-based companies for the conversion of 4 minibuses to run on electricity. The Trust has also provided grant funding to 10 local authorities, 1 charity, 1 public organisation, 4 private organisations and 1 private individual, all UK-based, for the purchase of 64 electric vehicles, as part of its Powershift programme.

Millennium (Emergency Cover)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans his Department has to contract with the armed services to provide emergency cover over the millennium period; and what estimate he has made of the cost of that cover. [62575]

Mr. Raynsford: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth), on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *20*.

EC Transport Council

Mr. Hood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the outcome of the Transport Council held in Brussels on 30 November; and if he will make a statement. [62328]

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the outcome of the EC Transport Council of 30 November to 1 December. [62943]

Dr. Reid: The Transport Council met in Brussels on 30 November and 1 December. I and my hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London represented the United Kingdom.

The Council agreed a common position on one legislative proposal and reached agreement on transport negotiations with Switzerland. It also agreed a report to the Vienna European Council on integration of

environmental requirements into transport policy, and held useful discussions in several other important areas of land, air and maritime transport policy.

In land transport, the Council agreed a common position on a directive on heavy goods vehicle taxation and charges (known as the "Eurovignette" directive). This was a difficult dossier, to which successive Presidencies, including our own, had contributed. The Council also reached agreement on the outcome of the European Commission's transport negotiations with Switzerland on behalf of the European Community. The complete package of negotiations with Switzerland, on transport and other items, will be finalised by the General Affairs Council.

There was a debate on two directives amending the rules promoting combined transport. Although there was general support for the underlying aim, there were concerns about the proposals as drafted. Among these were the UK's concern that, at least in the UK, the proposals would not have the desired effect of encouraging a shift of freight from road to rail, and would be likely to have perverse effects. In the absence of sufficient support the Presidency asked for further work to be done by the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER).

There was further discussion of the Commission's legislative proposals to establish a regulatory framework for the Community's railways. The UK strongly supports the proposals and referred to the Treaty requirement for progressive abolition of barriers to freedom to provide services. Following the discussion, the Presidency asked for further work to be done on the proposals.

Two measures were discussed relating to inland waterways, neither of which applies to the UK. Broad agreement was reached on a measure to extend a fleet capacity management programme, and the Council discussed a draft amending directive on technical standards for inland waterways vessels.

On air transport, the Presidency concluded that there was insufficient support for the draft conclusions which it had tabled on a full Community negotiating mandate for air transport negotiations with the US, and asked for further work to be carried out.

Disagreement between Spain and the UK over application to Gibraltar Airport prevented the Council agreeing a draft amending Regulation which would improve compensation arrangements for air passengers who are denied boarding on overbooked flights. The UK reaffirmed its strong support for the measure and rejected Spanish claims that Gibraltar Airport should be suspended from its application, pointing out that this would remove rights conferred on users of Gibraltar Airport by the original Regulation. The Presidency noted the Commission's request for further work on a Regulation on aviation statistics which has not progressed since 1996 when disagreement on application to Gibraltar Airport prevented its adoption. The Council also discussed a draft Directive providing for ramp checks on third country aircraft using EU airports which had previously been agreed, because Spain had now requested suspension of the application of the measure to Gibraltar Airport. The UK confirmed its support for the text agreed by the Council, regretting that Spain had objected to this important safety measure at such a late stage.

The Council noted the Commission's reports on the progress of negotiations to establish a European Aviation Safety Authority, for Community membership of Eurocontrol, and on extending the single aviation market to ten central and eastern European countries. The Council also noted progress on the draft Directive on airport charging, and received a report on the outcome of the 32nd meeting of the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) Assembly in Montreal.

In maritime transport, there was a debate on the draft directive on ferry manning conditions. The UK made clear its strong support for the proposal, which would protect Community seafarer employment. Some Member States thought that more information was needed about the impact of the proposal. At the Presidency's request, the Commission agreed to produce a report on the directive's likely impact and inform a future Council of progress.

The Council agreed a report on integrating environmental requirements into transport policy, to go to the European Council in Vienna on 11–12 December. The report outlines progress to date and indicates that the Council will draw up an ambitious phased work programme, a first report on which will be discussed by the end of 1999.

Under other business, the Commission presented its proposal for new working time rules in the road and maritime sectors, and presented its report on the development of transport Trans-European Networks.

Trains (Disabled Access)

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions his Department has had with rail operating companies concerning the provision of toilets with disabled access on trains. [62362]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the Rail Accessibility Regulations 1998, which will apply to all new types of rolling stock coming into service after 31 December this year, trains fitted with toilets for passengers will have to provide wheelchair accessible toilet facilities, as well as a wide range of other features to improve accessibility. The regulations have been drawn up in close consultation with train operating companies.

Taxis (Disabled Access)

Ms Kingham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with hackney carriage operators concerning the higher fares charged for the use of taxis with disabled access in many parts of the country. [62382]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The fixing of taxi fares outside London is a matter for the local licensing authority concerned. In London, where fares are fixed by the Secretary of State, the same tariff applies to all taxis, including those with access for disabled people.

Illegal Tipping

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to discourage illegal tipping. [62535]

Mr. Meacher: Stringent controls and severe penalties are already in place to discourage the illegal tipping of waste and the Environment Agency has made clear its commitment to taking firm enforcement action. The main controls and the maximum penalties are set out in the table:

Maximum penalties for offences relating to waste

Offence	*Magistrates' Court*	*Crown Court*
Sections 33(1)(a), (b) or (c) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990		
Unlawful deposit, recovery, disposal etc. of non-special waste	Imprisonment for 6 months and/or a fine of £20,000	Imprisonment for 2 years and/or an unlimited fine
Section 33(1)(a), (b) or (c) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990		
Unlawful deposit, recovery, disposal etc. of special waste	Imprisonment for 6 months and/or a fine of £20,000	Imprisonment for 5 years and/or an unlimited fine
Section 34(6) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990		
Breach of the duty of care or Regulations on retention etc. of documents	A fine not exceeding the statutory maximum	An unlimited fine
Section 1(1) Control of Pollution (Amendment) Act 1989		
Transporting waste without registering as a carrier	A fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale	n/a
Special Waste Regulations 1996		
Unlawful movement or handling of special waste	A fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale	Imprisonment for two years and/or an unlimited fine
Waste Management Licensing Regulations 1994: Regulation 20(5)		
Failure to register as a waste broker	A fine not exceeding level 5 on the standard scale	n/a
Waste Management Licensing Regulations 1994: Paragraph 12 Schedule 4		
Failure to register as a collector, transporter, dealer or broker of waste	A fine not exceeding level 2 on the standard scale	n/a

Radioactive Waste

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to release the report on the status of radioactive waste management at Dounreay prepared by the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee. [62392]

Mr. Meacher: I have not yet received the Radioactive Waste Management Advisory Committee's report on Dounreay, but I understand that it is to be supplied to Ministers by the Committee shortly. The Committee itself publishes all the advice it gives to Government.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what levels of radioactive discharges have been notified from each site on the Sellafield complex in each of the last five years. [62490]

Mr. Meacher: The data for years 1996 and 1997 are in the Environment Agency's Annual Reports for those years. For the preceding years 1993 to 1995, the data are contained in annual discharge returns, provided by BNFL and UKAEA, which relate to discharges from major stacks and approved places on the sites. The data are available on request from the public register at the Environment Agency North West Regional Office, Warrington, Cheshire and other local authority public registers in Cumbria and Lancashire.

I have asked the Environment Agency to collate data specifically for the Sellafield complex and I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of the letter in the Library as soon as this is available.

British Gas

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from British Gas plc concerning participation in a voluntary agreement relating to misleading environmental claims. [62377]

Mr. Meacher: My Department has received no representations from British Gas plc on this matter.

Drivers (Epilepsy)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has further to reduce the duration of the driving ban that follows an epileptic fit; and if he will make a statement. [62527]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are at present no plans to reduce from one year the period for which an ordinary driving licence is withdrawn following an epileptic attack. As with other medical conditions, however, the situation is kept under review, taking account of expert advice.

Asbestos

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the extent of illicit recycling of asbestos into building materials; and if he will make a statement. [62358]

Mr. Raynsford: Asbestos waste is controlled under the provisions of the Environmental Protection Act 1990 and the Special Waste Regulations 1996. The Environment Agency has responsibility for the enforcement of the relevant legislation.

The Environment Agency has no evidence to indicate that asbestos is being illicitly recycled into building materials.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions his Department has had with the British Occupational Hygiene Society on the dangers to working people of contact with asbestos; and if he will make a statement. [62596]

Mr. Meacher: The Health and Safety Executive and British Occupational Hygiene Society (BOHS) are in regular contact, and are planning a series of joint roadshows scheduled for early next summer to raise awareness of the dangers of contact with asbestos at work and to explain how to reduce the risks.

Rural Bus Challenge Competition

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce the results of the Rural Bus Challenge Competition. [62694]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am currently assessing 214 bids, which have been received. I hope to make an announcement shortly.

Local Government Pension Scheme

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what would be the estimated annual cost of extending the Local Government Pension Scheme (Transitional Provisions) Regulations 1997 regarding spouses' pensions to spouses who remarried or started to co-habit prior to 1 April 1998. [62690]

Mr. Raynsford: This information is not available. An actuarial assessment of the cost of providing spouses' pensions for life was carried out on behalf of the United Kingdom Steering Committee on local government pensions prior to introducing this improvement into the Local Government Pension Scheme from 1 April 1998. However, this did not identify the cost of surviving spouses' pensions for widows or widowers who were already re-married or co-habiting before that date.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the total costs were of medical investigations, inquiries and examinations incurred by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency in the most recent financial year for which figures are available; and what proportion of these costs related to drivers aged 70 years or over. [62795]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The total cost in 1997–98 of medical inquiries was £5.7 million of which £2.2 million was spent on medical reports and examinations. The proportion of these costs attributable to drivers aged over 70 is not available.

Housing Revenue Account (Oldham)

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the financial impact on Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council of the implementation of the 3,000 homes limit on subsidy recalculation of the housing revenue account. [62687]

Mr. Raynsford: Oldham Metropolitan Borough Council transferred 642 properties on the Limehurst Village estate to Limehurst Village Trust in March 1998. The number of properties transferred fell below the threshold (the lower of 3,000 dwellings or 10 per cent. of the authority's current stock) at which Housing Revenue Account (HRA) Subsidy would be recalculated for 1998–99. Oldham was required to consider the effects on subsidy before deciding to make the transfer. If subsidy had been recalculated, it is estimated that Oldham MBC would have received an additional £490,000 in HRA subsidy for 1998–99.

Motorways

Mr. Gill: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many miles of motorway were *(a)* completed and *(b)* under construction in (i) 1979 and (ii) 1997. [63101]

Ms Glenda Jackson: During 1979, 41.3 miles of motorway were completed out of a total of 120.2 miles of motorway which were under construction at some time in the year. During 1997, 42.7 miles of motorway were completed out of a total of 87.7 miles of motorway which were under construction at some time in the year. These figures include some motorway widening.

Rail Fares

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many rail fares have, since 1 January 1998, *(a)* increased by more than 5 per cent., *(b)* increased by 3 to 5 per cent., *(c)* increased by 0 to 3 per cent., *(d)* remained unchanged and *(e)* decreased. [62889]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not available in the form requested.

Under the Railways Act 1993 the regulation of fares is a matter for the Franchising Director. The Franchising Director regulates at least one fare between any two points on the network. Other fares, particularly discounted fares for off-peak travel, are set by the train operators. The Government have recently conducted research into the effects of fares regulation, based upon the fare actually paid by the passenger. The increase in average fares paid for 1995–96 and 1996–97 was 2.36 per cent, marginally below the RPI of 2.40 per cent. The increase between 1996–97 and 1997–98 was 3 per cent, below the RPI figure of 4 per cent. Between 1995–96 and 1996–97, the rate of increase in average fare paid fell below RPI for the first time since 1989–90.

Rail Cards

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how many young persons' rail cards were issued in each of the last 10 years; [62890]

(2) how many senior citizens' rail cards were issued in each of the last 10 years. [62888]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is in the table. Details of railcard sales in 1988–89 and 1989–90 are not available.

Financial year	Young Persons' Railcard	Senior Railcard
1997–98	722,443	679,664
1996–97	723,524	605,040
1995–96	683,719	569,904
1994–95	704,071	630,205
1993–94	652,840	681,425
1992–93	678,933	712,563
1991–92	712,672	760,648
1990–91	676,561	930,393

Integrated Transport

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the timetable for the publication of the daughter documents of the White Paper on integrated transport. [62417]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government have today issued their consultation document on road user charging and the workplace parking levy. The remaining daughter documents—papers on shipping, buses, sustainable distribution, road safety and inland waterways—will follow within the next few months. We will also be issuing a paper on ports policy, and confirming guidance on local transport plans, following up the draft guidance currently out to consultation. In addition, a strategy to encourage walking, produced by the Walking Steering Group, will be published by the Department early in the New Year.

Rail Users Consultative Committees

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to increase powers available to the rail users consultative committees; and if he will make a statement. [62430]

Ms Glenda Jackson: A New Deal for the Railways (Cm 4024) announced that, subject to legislation, sponsorship of the Rail Users' Consultative Committees will be transferred from the Rail Regulator to the Strategic Rail Authority (SRA). In future, the Committees will have explicit new powers to report perceived breaches of franchise agreements to the SRA, not just breaches of passenger and station licences. In addition, the Committees' remit will be extended to any open access operators (i.e. to passenger services not provided under franchise agreements). We will ensure that the Committees include a wide cross-section of passengers, and want them to co-operate with bus user representative bodies and to contribute jointly to the development of the regional transport strategies which will form part of Regional Planning Guidance.

Train Companies (Staff Reductions)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to ensure that staff reductions by train operating companies do not lead to compromises in safety. [62434]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the Railways Safety Case Regulations 1994, arrangements for operations or maintenance must be set out in a train operator's Railway Safety Case. Railway Safety Cases and any subsequent revisions have to be accepted by the Infrastructure controller or the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) before operations or revised operations can commence. Reductions in staffing levels would require amendment to a Railway Safety Case where this might affect safety. HSE monitors compliance with the Regulations and will take whatever action it considers appropriate (including enforcement action, if necessary) to ensure safety is not compromised.

Train Companies (Franchises)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the circumstances under which franchise agreements with train operating companies can be renegotiated; which franchises have been so renegotiated; and if he will make a statement. [62438]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Deputy Prime Minister has said that the books are open for renegotiating franchises in order to secure improved services for passengers. An announcement about how we will seek additional benefits through renegotiation will be made in due course.

The Franchising Director already has scope to negotiate additional commitments from franchisees. Where contravention of the franchise agreement has a materially adverse effect on passengers, the Franchising Director's Objectives, Instructions and Guidance, given to him in November 1997, require him to seek to secure contractual undertakings from the franchisee which will provide additional benefits as compensation for passengers. Where agreement has been sought to transfer control of a franchise to another party, the Franchising Director can also seek benefits for passengers. Substantial new commitments and changes to franchises negotiated by the Franchising Director since the Minister of Transport gave him new Objectives, Instructions and Guidance in November 1977 are shown in the table.

Franchise	Date	Circumstances	New commitments
Great Western Trains	23 February 1998	Three call-ins for infringements of thresholds for cancellations and part cancellations, deemed a breach of the franchise agreement	Operator committed to improvements in Passenger's Charter payments for delayed journeys, to implement a recovery plan to improve rolling stock reliability and train crew availability, to spend £500,000 on additional rolling stock items and £500,000 on additional customer information systems in 1998–99.

Franchise	Date	Circumstances	New commitments
Great Western Trains, North Western Trains and Great Eastern Railway	6 March 1998	Franchising Director agreed to buyout of Great Western Holdings Ltd. by FirstGroup plc	Great Western: 32 new vehicles by June 2002; one week's free travel for qualifying season ticket holders; new performance penalty regime; bus/rail integration schemes; new first class lounges; refurbishment of sleeper trains; improvements for cyclists. North Western: £1.2 million invested in agreement with PTEs and passenger representatives; 70 new vehicles equipped with CCTV security; £100,000 spent on access for disabled people; TOC to take more of the costs of planned vehicle refurbishment over from PTEs; improvements for cyclists. Great Eastern: replace all slam door trains by end of 2002; bus/rail integration schemes; modern rolling stock for Sudbury branch by October 1998.
Thames Trains	5 June 1998	Franchising Director agreed to buyout of Victory Railway Holdings Ltd. by the Go-Ahead Group plc	£500k spent on station improvements; improvements to Passengers' Charter; new through service Oxford-Didcot-Swindon-Bath-Bristol; bus/rail through ticketing; improvements for cyclists at Oxford; improved access to Heathrow Airport; reinstate London-bound platform at South Greenford.
Chiltern Railway	19 August 1998	Three call-ins for infringements of thresholds for cancellations and part cancellations, deemed a breach of the franchise agreement	One week's free travel for qualifying season ticket holders; improved Passenger's Charter compensation provisions; improved security; new public address system and help points; improvements to facilities for disabled people, toilets and passenger shelters.
West Coast Trains; Cross Country Trains; South West Trains	7 October 1998	Franchising Director agreed acquisition of 49 per cent. of shares in Virgin Rail Group (VRG) by Stagecoach plc	Bus/rail integration schemes; improved Passenger's Charter compensation terms; 16 new vehicles for VRG or South West Trains; £500k spent on improvements at stations served, but not operated, by VRG; passenger fora hosted by senior directors of all three TOCs.
North Western Trains	29 October 1998	Concentration of cancellations on Oldham Loop, deemed a breach of the franchise agreement	Two weeks' free travel for season ticket holders; to be extended to other ticket holders by negotiation with Greater Manchester PTE.
LTS Rail	11 November 1998	Review of rolling stock availability relating to Class 317s scheduled for release from WAGN Railway	Relieved LTS Rail of incentive payments due if Class 317s not taken over from WAGN. Commitment to replace all slam door stock by March 2002; 12 additional vehicles; improved Passenger's Charter; more exacting performance thresholds; £2 million spend on passenger information systems, increased staffing and other facilities; additional spend each year on staffing; improved facilities for disabled people and passenger security; bus/rail integration schemes; improved access to Lakeside shopping centre; improvements for cyclists; additional reduced rate early morning season tickets.

Concessionary Bus Passes

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of persons of pensionable age currently have access to a concessionary fares bus pass. [62419]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand that 11 local authorities have no concessionary fare scheme for their resident pensioners. The number of pensioners in those local authority areas represents about 2.6 per cent. of the total number of pensioners in England.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of concessionary fare bus passes *(a)* currently issued and *(b)* which will be issued when the nationwide £5 bus pass is introduced; and if he will make a statement. [62418]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No such estimate can be made, because my Department does not hold statistics on the number of passes issued; that is a matter for the individual local authorities concerned. Without that information it is

not possible to calculate any likely change in numbers of passes issued due to our proposal for a national minimum standard for concessionary fares for pensioners, based on a £5 bus pass and half fares on buses.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the extra cost to the public purse from the introduction of a nationwide concessionary fare bus pass at *(a)* £5 and *(b)* £10 assuming (i) a continuation of the present number of passes issued and (ii) his estimate of the increased number of passes which might be issued. [62420]

Ms Glenda Jackson: It is not possible to give such an estimate, because the cost and the number of passes issued would depend not only on the price of the pass, but also on the level of concessionary fare with which the pass was associated.

Lorries (Weight Restrictions)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to restrict lorry access by weight to non-trunk roads. [62429]

Ms Glenda Jackson: It would be impractical to impose a national ban on lorry traffic on non-trunk roads because most lorry journeys begin and end on such roads. Non-trunk roads are the responsibility of local traffic authorities who have powers to make traffic regulation orders to prohibit or restrict lorry access, subject in limited cases to a requirement to hold a public inquiry and obtain the Secretary of State's consent.

Train Companies (Sub-contracting)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the implications for public accountability of the sub-contracting of services by train operating companies; and if he will make a statement. [62433]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This was considered by the Franchising Director before letting the current franchises. Train operators may make arrangements with each other for operating services on a subcontracted basis, subject to conditions which ensure that the arrangements do not transfer control of the services concerned, or the obligation to deliver the Passenger Service Requirement (PSR), to the subcontractor; and subject to a maximum of 5 per cent. of the aggregate scheduled train mileage of the operator subcontracting services. Subcontracting above this limit or outside the terms of the conditions requires the consent of the Franchising Director or, where applicable, the relevant Passenger Transport Executive (PTE). In addition, the Franchising Director requires clear separation between different franchises held by the same franchisee, and any relationship between them must be on an arm's-length basis and set out in clear contracts.

Train Companies (Passenger Service Requirements)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the appropriateness of the criteria applied to train operating companies in respect of passenger service requirements; what plans he has to alter these; and if he will make a statement. [62437]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have considered the revised Criteria for the Appraisal of Support for Passenger Rail Services, which the Franchising Director has submitted to us for approval, and he expects to issue them shortly.

Travel Safety Statistics

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many casualties per kilometre travelled were recorded in *(a)* 1987, *(b)* 1992 and *(c)* 1997 in respect of (i) car, (ii) train, (iii) motorbike, (iv) bicycle and (v) air travel. [62893]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is shown in the table.

Passenger casualty rates by mode

Per billion passenger kilometres

	1987	*[1] 1992*	*[2] 1996*	*Average 1987–96*
Car [3]				
Killed	4.6	3.6	3.1	3.7
KSI	61.3	45.3	41.7	48.0
All	335.8	334.5	356.2	339.2
Rail [4]				
Killed	1.0	0.04	0.03	[6]—
KSI	3.3	2.6	[7]—	[6]—
All	76.6	65.9	19.4	[6]—
Two wheeled motor vehicles [4]				
Killed	100.4	97.0	98.8	101.4
KSI	1,929.3	1,516.3	1,391.1	1,699.4
All	6,359.0	5,555.1	5,176.1	5,958.5
Pedal cycle [3]				
Killed	48.8	43.4	47.2	46.5
KSI	893.9	849.1	880.2	887.2
All	4,563.4	5,267.0	5,705.6	5,201.5
Air [5]				
Killed	0.0	0.01	0.0	0.1
KSI	0.0	0.1	[6]—	0.1
All	[6]—	0.1	[6]—	0.1

KSI—killed and seriously injured

[1] 1992 onwards—casualty rates based on revised exposure figures.

[2] For rail casualties there is no longer a distinction between major and minor injuries under the new Accidents Reporting regulations 1995, which came into effect on 1 April 1996. Injuries are classified as either 'minor injury' or 'death'. The reporting trigger for minor injury is the passenger being taken to hospital.

[3] Drivers and passengers in Great Britain.

[4] Financial years from 1991–92.

[5] World passenger carrying services of UK airlines for fixed and rotary wing craft over 2,300 kilograms. Passenger kilometres relate to revenue passengers only.

[6] negligible (less than half the final digit shown)

[7] not available

[8] not applicable

Train Companies (Compensation Payments)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much was paid in compensation payments, and to how many individual passengers, by each train operating company in the last year for which figures are available. [62894]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the franchise agreement, each franchise operator must have a Passenger's Charter which provides for compensation for day ticket holders

whose journey are delayed, and for season ticket holders who suffer poor performance over a period. At the start of the franchises these terms were at least as favourable as British Rails; since then, a number of operators' terms have tightened, either through negotiation with Franchising Director or at an operator's own commercial initiative. Operators have varying Charter compensation terms and information about payments belongs to each operator. The Franchising Director has the contractual right to inspect records, to ensure compliance, but they are not maintained on a comparable basis across all TOCs.

Green Ministers Meeting

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the departments which, at the meeting of Green Ministers on 18 November, were represented by officials. [62415]

Mr. Meacher: The following departments were represented by officials:

Department for Culture, Media and Sport
Department of Social Security
Department of Trade and Industry
Foreign and Commonwealth Office
HM Treasury.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the meeting of Green Ministers on 18 November considered methods of *(a)* decreasing car journeys by Ministers and *(b)* making the cars made available to Ministers less polluting. [62416]

Mr. Meacher: The Green Ministers' meeting on 18 November discussed progress on delivering green transport plans across Government. These plans will comprise measures to encourage staff to choose alternatives to single-occupancy car use, including public transport, cycling, walking and car-sharing, to reduce the environmental impact of travel and to reduce the need to travel. Where feasible, Ministers use public transport or walk. However, security issues and issues of practicality can mean that cars are often essential.

But the Government Car Service is committed to reducing the environmental impact of its fleet, and has begun to convert its vehicles to use Liquid Petroleum Gas, a significantly cleaner fuel than conventional fuels, with the aim of converting its entire fleet within the next five years. It also has a programme monitoring fuel consumption and providing driver training with a published target for improving the average fuel efficiency across its fleet by at least half a mile per gallon every year.

Through-ticketing

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to promote through-ticketing between train and bus services. [62891]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under his objectives, instructions and Guidance, the Franchising Director is required to take all appropriate steps to provide for the participation by franchises in multi-modal travel schemes, and to manage franchise agreements in a way which reflects our policy on transport integration. Accordingly, where he has negotiated new commitments from franchises, these have included through ticketing and timetable integration schemes which promote through journeys by rail and bus services, both within towns served by the railway and towns and villages. The number of similar schemes have been promoted by operators at their own initiative. We will be looking to build on this as we consider the renegotiation of franchise agreements.

Road Traffic Reductions

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the places where his Department wants road traffic levels to be reduced; and within what time scale it wants them to be reduced. [62892]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *458*.

Coach Services

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the implications for rail services of the introduction of new coach services which could be assumed to seek to divert passenger traffic from parallel rail lines. [62432]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Coach operators may provide whatever services they wish in response to commercial demand, although where they could undermine rail services they may be subject to review by the competition authorities. The Rail Regulator and the Franchising Director would advise the Director General of Fair Trading in these circumstances, but any final decision would rest with my right hon. Friend the President of the Board of Trade.

Train Companies (Subsidy Reductions)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what circumstances he can implement a reduction in subsidy to a train operating company in addition to that agreed in the franchise agreement. [62436]

Ms Glenda Jackson: All payments to and from franchise operators are governed by franchise agreements and changes to the basis for such payments could be made only during the term of existing franchises by negotiation and agreement between the contracting parties i.e. the Franchising Director and, in some cases, the Passenger Transport Executive and the franchise operator.

Strategic Rail Authority

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will allow the Strategic Rail Authority to retain revenue received from fines levied by that authority. [62431]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are currently reviewing a wide range of fines currently paid into the Consolidated Fund, to consider which ones should be retained by the levying authority.

Mark One Rolling Stock

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to receive the report on mark one rolling stock from the Health and Safety Executive. [62435]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *39*.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each local authority the increase in standard spending assessment *(a)* for education, *(b)* for social services and *(c)* overall, included in the 1998–99 local government revenue finance settlement. [62886]

Ms Armstrong: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Air Carrier Liability

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will continue to pursue any prosecutions under Air Carrier Liability Order 1998/1751 pending the outcome of IATA's application for judicial review of the order; and if he will make a statement. [62944]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Unless and until the Air Carrier Liability Order 1998 is either amended by Parliament or declared by the courts to be void and of no effect, it remains in force and the possibility of prosecution for breaches of the Order therefore cannot be excluded.

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment the Government have made of the implementation of Council regulation (EC) No. 2027/97 on air carrier liability following accidents in each member state; what assessment he has made of the level and nature of implementation in each member state; and if he will make a statement. [62945]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government have made no assessment of measures taken by other EU member states in giving effect to the Council Regulation in their jurisdictions. However, I can report that at a meeting in Brussels convened by the European Commission on 10 September 1998, when member states were asked what measures they had taken or planned to take to implement the Regulation, all eight member states present had either taken or already possessed powers to enforce the provisions of the Regulation.

National Air Traffic Control

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is the Government's intention to sell National Air Traffic Control Services in the financial year 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [62942]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are currently consulting interested parties on their proposal to establish a public-private partnership for National Air Traffic Services Ltd. We will take full account of the views of consultees in reaching final decisions on the future of NATS and will bring forward legislation at the earliest opportunity. The timing of any sale is for consideration once the legislation is in place.

IATA *v.* UK Government

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the costs to the Government so far of the case brought by IATA against the UK Government concerning the implementation of EC regulation 2027/97; if he will estimate the likely total cost to the UK taxpayer; and how long he estimates the case will take to resolve. [62946]

Ms Glenda Jackson: At the preliminary hearing in the High Court in November, the judge refused IATA's request for an immediate reference of the matter to the European Court of Justice and awarded costs to the Secretary of State. A further hearing has been scheduled for February 1999, at which the substance of IATA's case will be considered, but it is not possible to predict the total cost to the Government of the action since this will depend on the length of the judicial process in reaching a decision and whether the Government are again awarded costs in the event of a successful defence. A reference to the European Court of Justice, which would result in a protraction of matters, cannot be excluded.

Four-star Petrol

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what exceptions he plans to make to the proposed ban on the sale of four-star petrol; if disabled drivers will receive financial help in replacing or converting their cars; and if he will make a statement. [63062]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are considering options with the oil industry and other interested organisations with regard to the continuance, under the terms of the EU directive, of a very limited supply of leaded petrol. However, its availability will ultimately be a commercial decision.

Vehicles driven by disabled drivers are generally ordinary passenger cars or light vans all of which have been required to use unleaded petrol for several years. Older vehicles requiring leaded petrol will be able to use lead replacement petrol or an anti-wear additive in conjunction with unleaded petrol. Particular financial help for disabled drivers is not therefore necessary.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he has taken to ensure that local government computers are millennium compliant; how much money has been allocated to this; what percentage of this has been given to Taskforce 2000; and if he will make a statement. [62409]

Mr. Raynsford: We are working closely with the Local Government Association, the Local Government Management Board and the Audit Commission to ensure that all councils are properly prepared to deal with the millennium bug. My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister has, jointly with Sir Jeremy Beecham, Chairman

of the Local Government Association, written twice this year to each council leader stressing the importance of their taking action, inviting them to sign Pledge 2000, and to nominate a senior member to take local responsibility for seeing that action on this issue is driven forward. The Local Government Finance Settlement takes into account the need for councils to deal with the Year 2000 problem. On the basis of returns submitted to DETR, English local authorities have, in aggregate, provided £64.6 million in their 1998–99 reported budgets to deal with the Year 2000 problem.

Huddersfield Canal

Mr. Woolas: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce the decision on funding from English Partnerships for the Huddersfield Canal Project. [63066]

Mr. Caborn: A full economic appraisal of the Huddersfield Narrow Canal Millennium Project, to ensure that the proposal is robust and represents good value for money, has been carried out by English Partnerships. English Partnerships Board recently give its support for almost £13 million of the funding to the project, subject to agreement on a number of contractual details with its partners, the local authorities and British Waterways. The level of English Partnerships' proposed investment means that the project requires approval from my Department. I expect a final decision in the next few weeks.

Regional Eurostar Services

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has received the review into the feasibility of regional Eurostar services; and if he will make a statement. [63225]

Mr. Prescott: The Consortium presented its report "Review of Regional Eurostar Services" to me on 13 November and a copy has today been placed in the Library. The Government have noted the conclusions of the report and will be commissioning a thorough, independent review of it, and of the alternative proposals put forward by the Virgin Group. The Government will also be working with the parties to seek to ensure that the regions have access to convenient, effective Channel Tunnel services.

Trust Ports

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the outcome of his review of trust ports. [63227]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Our review of the role and status of trust ports has been completed, and we have now published a summary consultation paper setting out conclusions and recommendations. We have asked that responses and comments on this paper should be sent to the Department by 31 January 1999. Copies of the paper have been placed in the Library.

Driving Tests

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to revise the practical driving test. [63228]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Following extensive consultation, we have decided to make important changes to the practical driving test, its length, content and the way it is marked.

From Spring 1999, candidates will be required to demonstrate their skills in a broader range of road and traffic conditions. Tests will have about ten minutes more general driving. Test routes will include more higher speed dual carriageways and rural roads. The emergency stop exercise will be carried out at random in about one third of all car tests rather than all of them. Candidates who commit large numbers of less serious driving faults will fail their test. The threshold will initially be set at 15 faults. The revised test will set higher standards for candidates' driving and will check they are prepared for the pressure of driving in today's road and traffic conditions.

The package also includes measures to raise training standards. We plan to introduce a voluntary log book scheme at the same time as the test is amended, to aid candidates and their instructors to gauge progress towards test standard. Candidates will also be given more detailed written feedback about their performance on test by the examiner. This will advise unsuccessful candidates about the reasons they failed and provide those who passed guidance about aspects of their driving which could still be improved.

The implementation date for these changes will be announced shortly. The longer test and the revised marking arrangements will be introduced for the motorcycle test, and the emergency stop exercise will be retained in all those tests. The revised marking arrangements will also be introduced for lorry and bus driver tests. Training logbooks for these sectors will be developed in consultation with the representative bodies.

Planning Guidance

Mr. Ennis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department will be issuing for consultation draft guidance for local authorities on land-use planning and electromagnetic fields. [63262]

Mr. Caborn: The Department has today issued for consultation the draft of a joint circular with the Department of Health. It gives guidance to local planning authorities in drawing up development plan policies or deciding planning applications for development giving rise to electromagnetic fields (EMFs) or for development proposed in the vicinity of existing sources of EMFs. Examples of development emitting EMFs are overhead power lines and telecommunications base stations. The Government recognise that there is some public concern about the possible health effects of exposure to EMFs and it is upon this aspect that the guidance focuses.

Comments are requested by 19 February 1999. Copies of the consultation package have been placed in the Library.

Transport Safety

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how he intends

to implement the review of the arrangements for transport safety announced in the Transport White Paper; and if he will make a statement. [63307]

Dr. Reid: The White Paper on the future of transport "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone" announced the Government's intention to review the arrangements for transport safety, including those for accident investigation.

In carrying out this review, we will address recommendations from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Select Committee that transport safety regulation should be focused on a single independent authority as a means of separating safety regulation from operational responsibilities. As the Select Committee's recommendations have potentially wide-reaching implications for the current institutional framework, the review will embrace all transport modes and consider the roles and responsibilities of a number of organisations concerned with transport safety.

The aim of the review is a modern institutional framework, designed to deliver continued improvements to transport safety and secure public confidence. It will focus on the principles that should govern the organisational and regulatory arrangements for transport safety, including those for personal security, and cover the main areas of public concern, from the setting of safety standards to the investigation of accidents. In particular, it will address institutional obstacles that are seen to act as a constraint to better regulation of safety and consider whether there are aspects of the current organisational arrangements that could give rise to conflicts of interest. It will not address the substance of policies for the operational safety of individual modes taken forward within the current institutional framework.

An inter-departmental steering group has been set up to guide the review which will work to the following terms of reference:

"to consider whether a more integrated or unified approach to transport safety across modes would be more effective, produce a safer travelling environment and secure best value for money".

The review will involve representatives of the transport industries and those working in them, together with consumers. We have set up a small advisory panel to provide an independent sounding board and external influence on the work of the review. There will also be consultation in the Spring on the organisational and operational principles that should apply to any new arrangements for transport safety.

Our aim is to complete the review process and announce decisions in about 18 months.

TREASURY

Bank of England

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff at the Bank of England were employed in the *(a)* Traded Markets Team and *(b)* Supervision and Surveillance Division of the Bank of England on (i) 31 December 1996 and (ii) 31 December 1997. [61037]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* As at 31 December 1996 there were 420 staff employed in the Supervision and Surveillance Divisions of the Bank including 10 staff in the Traded Markets Team.

As at 31 December 1997 there were 448 staff employed in the Supervision and Surveillance Divisions of the Bank including 11 staff in the Traded Markets Team.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many staff have transferred from the *(a)* Traded Markets Team and *(b)* Supervision and Surveillance Division of the Bank of England to the Financial Services Authority. [61038]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* Nine and 406 respectively.

EU Code of Conduct Group

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what matters have been discussed by the EU Code of Conduct Group to date; and if he will make a statement. [61884]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* The Code of Conduct Group has discussed matters which relate to potentially harmful and discriminatory tax measures as is its remit.

Duty Free Sales

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to retain duty free sales in the EU; and if he will make a statement. [62102]

Dawn Primarolo: This matter was discussed by European Finance Ministers at the ECOFIN Council meeting on 1 December 1998. A minority of member states, supported by the UK, called for a fresh look at the decision to end intra-EU duty free sales on 30 June 1999.

Stamp Duty

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the total amount raised in stamp duty on share transactions in each of the last five years. [62276]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* The figures are as follows:

Stamp duty (including stamp duty reserve tax) on transactions of shares and other securities

£ million

Year	*Amount*
1993–94	1,035
1994–95	1,013
1995–96	1,298
1996–97	1,408
1997–98	1,960

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the Government's plans with regard to the current stamp duty exemption when authorised unit trusts merge with an open-ended investment company. [63263]

Ms Hewitt: Following a number of representations, we intend to extend the current temporary exemption from Stamp Duty Reserve Tax (SDRT) when authorised unit trusts merge into an open-ended investment company

(OEIC) to match the timetable for the introduction of the framework to allow the formation of a wider range of OEICS. This means that investment funds which intend to rationalise their range of products by merging authorised unit trusts into an OEIC will have the opportunity to do so without paying a Stamp Duty or SDRT charge.

The current exemption for mergers of authorised unit trusts into OEICs ends on 30 June 1999. We intend to extend this until a year after the coming into force of Treasury Regulations putting in place the new framework.

Drugs (Turkey)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate his Department has made of the proportion of heroin that enters the United Kingdom via Turkey. [62512]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs does not have a reliable estimate of the proportion of heroin which enters the United Kingdom via Turkey. The amount Customs seized during 1997 known to have originated in or transited through Turkey was 1037.33 kilograms which represented 59.37 per cent. of the total amount of heroin seized by Customs during that year, but Customs assess that around 80 per cent. of the total seized has arrived from Turkey.

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his e-mail address; and what is the e-mail address of the Chief Secretary of the Treasury. [62559]

Ms Hewitt: All Treasury Ministers can be e-mailed through the Treasury's website (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk) or the Public Enquiry Unit (public.enquiries@hm-treasury.gov.uk).

Charities

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he plans to publish the Charities Tax Review consultation document. [62334]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The Government received over 3,000 replies in the first phase of the Review and are determined to consider carefully all the options before launching the next phase. We intend to publish a Consultation Document as soon as possible.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent changes in practice there have been regarding the 10 per cent. commercial use concession to charities' zero rating for new buildings. [62338]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* None. Zero-rating is available for charity buildings that are used solely for non-business purposes. However, when the building is used for a business purpose for less than 10 per cent. of the total time that it is open, that use is ignored.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has made to the EU Commission regarding the special VAT zero-rating arrangements for charities regarding *(a)* the supply of lifeboats to the RNLI, *(b)* the conversion of lifeboat slipways, *(c)* the supply of medical research equipment to charities and *(d)* the supply of equipment for the disabled to charities; and if he will veto any proposals to end these arrangements. [62336]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* As my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary said in the House on 1 December 1998, there are no detailed proposals from the Commission to change the existing VAT rates, and existing EC agreements fully safeguard the UK's zero rates.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the revenue cost to charities of EU proposals to *(a)* end zero rating and *(b)* end exempt activities in respect of VAT. [62337]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* There are no proposals from the Commission to change the existing VAT rates for charities.

Winter Mortality Rates

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many deaths, where hypothermia was mentioned on the death certificate as the main or contributory cause of death, took place in England and Wales in 1997 among those *(a)* of all ages, *(b)* aged 60 to 74, *(c)* aged 74 to 84 and *(d)* aged over 85 years; what were the winter mortality rates for (i) the population as a whole, (ii) people aged 60 to 74, (iii) people aged 75 to 84 and (iv) people aged 85 years and over; and what the percentage increase was in each group compared to non-winter deaths in 1997–98. [62794]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Eddie O'Hara, dated 8 December 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your parliamentary question on deaths from hypothermia and winter morality rates.

The information requested is shown below.

Deaths where hypothermia was mentioned on the death certificate, England and Wales, 1997

Ages	*Number*
All Ages	357
60–74	51
75–84	127
85 and over	127

Excess winter mortality, England and Wales, 1997–98 [1]

Age	*Excess winter deaths* [2]	*Percentage increase in mortality in winter*
All ages	23,680	14
60–74	5,050	11
75–84	7,960	14
85 and over	9,180	19

[1] provisional
[2] rounded to the nearest 10

Excess winter deaths are defined as the difference between the number of deaths during the four winter months (December to March) and the average of the number of deaths during the preceding autumn (August to November) and the following summer (April to July).

VAT (Football Transfer Fees)

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) what the annual revenue is from VAT on football transfer fees for *(a)* players under contract and *(b)* players under 24 years who are out of contract; [62800]

(2) if he will estimate the annual revenue forgone as a result of the decision of the European Court in the Bosman case relating to football transfer fees; and if he will make a statement. [62799]

Dawn Primarolo: Any VAT relating to football transfer fees can be recovered by the acquiring club. Therefore, there is no VAT revenue from football transfer fees and no VAT revenue forgone as a result of the judgment of the European Court in the Bosman case.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Smoking

Mr. Burns: To ask the Chairman of the Catering Committee for what reasons smoking has been banned in the *(a)* Churchill Room and *(b)* Members' and Strangers' Dining Rooms; and for what reasons it is permitted in the Press Gallery Dining Room. [62651]

Mr. Dennis Turner: The Committee agreed that smoking should no longer be permitted in the Churchill Room and in the Members' and Strangers' Dining Rooms following representations made to it by hon. Members requesting such a course of action. I understand that the Director of Catering Services has received no such representations from members of the Lobby and Gallery concerning smoking in the Press Dining Room.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Lottery Funding

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which sporting venues have received lottery funding for athletics in the past 12 months. [62175]

Mr. Banks: Listed are the sporting venues which have received Lottery sports funding from the English Sports Council for athletics in the period 1 December 1997 to 30 November 1998:

Stourport Sports Club, Stourport-on-Severn, Worcestershire
Exeter Arena, Exeter, Devon
Trafford Athletic Club, Stockport, Cheshire
Moorways Sports Complex, Derby
Priory School, Lewes, East Sussex
Eastbourne Sports Complex, Darlington, County Durham
Sunnydale Leisure Centre, Shildon, County Durham
Erith Running Track, Erith, Kent
Battersea Athletics Track, London
Par Recreation Ground, Cornwall.

Mr. Fearn: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much lottery funding the sport of basketball has received over the last 12 months. [62176]

Mr. Banks: In the period 1 December 1997 to 30 November 1998, basketball received Lottery capital sports facilities awards of £990,039 from the English Sports Council, towards total project costs of £1,285,052. The English Sports Council has awarded a total of £25,409,308 to the sport since awards began in March 1995.

Since the World Class Performance programme commenced in October 1997, 17 English wheelchair basketball players have received a combined total of £468,839 from Lottery sports funding. In addition, £14,500 has been awarded from World Class Events funding in an effort to bring the 2002 world championship for wheelchair basketball to this country.

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many contracts for the UK Sports Institute have been *(a)* put out to tender and *(b)* signed. [62702]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* This is primarily a matter for those in Sheffield who are setting up the Headquarters of the UK Sports Institute. However, I understand that a number of contracts, including contracts for design and for site investigation as well as contracts of employment, have been let although no construction contracts have yet been put out to tender or signed. Both the UK Sports Council and Phoenix have assured me that good progress is being made.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what progress has been made in identifying sites for the national and regional centres of the UK Sports Institute. [62701]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* We have already announced that the Headquarters of the UK Sports Institute will be located in Sheffield. Separate announcements have been made about arrangements in Scotland. So far as England is concerned, the English Sports Council has been consulting wide with potential providers of services and I understand it will soon be in a position to make further proposals to the Government. We have already agreed that there should be a devolved regional structure. Some extra time has been taken by the Council to ensure that the whole of England is adequately covered, including East Anglia and the concentrations of population of the south coast.

National Lottery

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what is the current National Lottery surplus; and if he will make a statement. [62634]

Mr. Banks: The National Lottery has so far raised £6.6 billion for Good Causes. £5.6 billion has been awarded to projects across the UK of which £2.99 billion has already been paid out. The remaining £1 billion is yet to be committed to projects. Any money held in the National Lottery Distribution Fund earns (tax free) interest for the good causes.

The recent changes to the Lottery will allow a more flexible approach to distributing Lottery money. The shift in emphasis from buildings to people should mean that more money will be distributed more quickly across the country.

PRIME MINISTER

Policy Unit (Travel)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list each overseas trip paid for out of public funds by members of the No. 10 Policy Unit since 1 May 1997, indicating in each case the *(a)* individuals involved, *(b)* destination, *(c)* purpose and *(d)* cost; and if he will make a statement. [62095]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* For the period 1 May 1997 to the end of October 1998, members of the No. 10 Policy Unit have travelled overseas on official business for talks with officials from European governments on 26 occasions. The average cost of travel was about £380.00 per person. Only one special adviser travelled on each occasion except for a visit to Bonn undertaken by three special advisers. Subsistence costs were met on four occasions, totalling approximately £700. All visits have been made in accordance with the rules set out in the Civil Service Management Code.

In addition, members of the No. 10 Policy Unit have accompanied me and other Ministers on my official visits abroad. Information on these visits has been provided in answer to previous parliamentary questions.

These arrangements follow the practice of successive administrations.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list all current special advisers in his Office; and if he will indicate the subjects on which they advise. [62798]

The Prime Minister: I refer the right hon. Member to the answers I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby (Mr. Mitchell) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, column *860;* my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Mr. Corbett) on 14 January 1998, *Official Report*, column *233–34*; the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) on 5 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *278;* and the hon. Member for Buckingham (Mr. Bercow), on 6 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *356–57*.

In addition, Dr. Iain Anderson is employed as a part-time, unpaid Adviser on the Millennium Bug providing advice to me and my right hon. Friend the President of the Council.

Parliament (State Opening)

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Prime Minister what estimate he has made of the total costs of the State Opening of Parliament. [62214]

The Prime Minister: Some £50,000 has been jointly set aside by the two Houses, from their Vote, for the State Opening of Parliament. As in previous years, approximately £1,600 has been allocated for the printing of the Queen's Speech.

The Metropolitan Police estimate policing costs for the State Opening at around £240,000, a similar figure to previous years. This excludes the costs incurred by the Metropolitan Police in providing the permanent security service within the Palace of Westminster. It also excludes costs such as catering. These figures do not include any additional cost of military staff who took part in the ceremony, which are not separately costed.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the special advisers in her Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62836]

Clare Short: I have two Special Advisers, David Mepham and Dee Sullivan, who advise me on the full range of issues for which I am responsible. They are strongly committed to international development and I value their work greatly. They work in full co-operation with my departmental officials on the issues on which it would be inappropriate for officials to work. Special Advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements. It would not be appropriate to give details about the level of security clearance applying in the case of particular individuals.

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is her e-mail address. [62878]

Clare Short: The e-mail address of my office is c-short@dfid.gtnet.gov.uk.

Afghanistan

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has in respect of future humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan. [63056]

Clare Short: My Department has just concluded a review of Department for International Development's (DFID) current humanitarian programme to Afghanistan.

Our assessment is that while the forthcoming winter may see a seasonal lull in active fighting, there is little prospect for a settlement of the conflict.

Serious human rights abuses appear to have been perpetrated by all parties, and the discovery of mass graves has generated demands for an external investigation, together with the deployment of human rights monitors. We are supporting this in the UN, and have urged the involvement of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights. The Taliban continue to impose difficult working conditions including limiting access to women. The Taliban have also not kept their pledge on narcotics, and production has actually expanded over the past year.

The UN aid agencies have not returned their expatriate staff to Afghanistan as conditions for their return (including satisfactory account of investigations into the past killings of UN workers, and assurances over future security) have not yet been met. The ICRC have remained in the country but with a curtailed programme and

reduced expatriate representation. Some NGOs are sending back their expatriate staff, while others are still waiting to see what happens in coming weeks.

The humanitarian situation inside Afghanistan—in terms of basic physical needs—is under reasonable control at the present time. People are coping partly due to increased food production in areas that have seen little active fighting this year. However health services, rudimentary to start with, are further stretched or broken down. We are also informed that the situation in the Central Bamiyan region is precarious. Humanitarian needs may become more stark in parts of Afghanistan if there is a severe winter.

Current DFID Programme

During our Presidency of the European Union, the UK negotiated a Common Position, led a Joint EU Mission to create a broad consensus on aid strategy, and hosted a meeting of the Afghan Support Group in London. We also continue to support the mediation efforts of the United Nations Special Mission to Afghanistan, and the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi.

Our effort to help create a system-wide approach to Afghanistan, and increase synergy between peace-making and humanitarian assistance, has been underpinned by the provision of £8.5 million in 1998: this includes support for:

ICRC's protection, humanitarian law and medical relief work;

demining through the UN and Halo Trust;

United Nations Office For The Co-ordination Of Humanitarian Assistance for Afghanistan (UNOCHA) for co-ordination and common services to benefit the whole system (e.g. communications, logistics, aircraft);

NGOs (Afghanaid, Christian Aid, CARE, TEAR Fund, Support for Afghan Further Education (SAFE); BBC, Children in Crisis, the Agency Co-ordinating Body for Afghan Relief (ACBAR), British Agencies Afghan Group) for education, health, water, sanitation and co-ordination activities;

UNHCR for refugee care and protection programmes;

and FAO for livestock and food security.

Useful impact has been achieved in terms of encouraging an effective principled common approach to programming, promoting protection, building livelihood security and making use of the available modest opportunities for education for girls and boys. We also provided disaster relief when two major earthquakes struck Northern Afghanistan earlier this year.

Forward Strategy

We will continue to remain engaged in Afghanistan. In doing so, we will be informed by the principled common programming approach under the United Nations led Strategic Framework for Afghanistan that we have been instrumental in developing and promoting. The purpose of the Strategic Framework is:

to enhance reinforcement between the United Nations political strategy in Afghanistan and international assistance activities;

to promote greater effectiveness and coherence in the international assistance programme.

We recognise that the operating context for humanitarian agencies will remain highly uncertain for the time being. Until we have fresh information to the contrary, we shall continue to advise British aid workers against returning to Afghanistan because of security concerns. This means that we are not able to support NGOs that send expatriates back into the country. This restriction does not apply in the same way to ICRC and UN agencies because of their specially mandated role under international agreements.

We shall also consider further funding for ICRC and selected UN agencies in Afghanistan after appraisal of the Consolidated Interagency Appeal due to be launched next week by the United Nations. Guidance to Agencies wishing to apply for DFID funds includes the expectation that they will also subscribe to the above principles of the Strategic Framework for Afghanistan. New funding commitments would be limited to six months. We shall conduct another review of Afghanistan policy in mid-1999 unless there is significant earlier change in circumstances.

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TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the cost to his Department of travel by Ministers in his Department in *(a)* RAF and *(b)* privately chartered aircraft (i) in the year to 1 May 1997 and (ii) since 1 May 1997. [60904]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* The cost of travel for DTI Ministers:

(a) In RAF Aircraft

(i) For the year to 1 May 1997: Nil

(ii) Since 1 May 1997: £15,934.80

(b) In Privately Chartered Aircraft

(i) For the year to 1 May: £24,199.01

(ii) Since 1 May 1997: £11,314.72.

Company Accounts

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many company directors were disqualified for one or more Companies Act 1985 offences for failing to keep adequate accounting records in each year since 1987. [61959]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* There are no known instances since 1987 where a director has been disqualified solely for failing to keep adequate accounting records.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many companies were *(a)* found guilty and *(b)* fined for not disclosing to the public that a director has (i) resigned and (ii) been appointed within two weeks of that resignation under section 288 of the Companies Act 1985 in each year since 1987. [61955]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* Since 1987 three convictions have been secured under section 288 of the Companies Act 1985. These convictions were obtained in the year 1990–91 but there is no record of the fines, if any, imposed.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the maximum available punishment following a conviction as a director of a company which failed to keep adequate accounting records. [61951]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* There are a number of penalties laid out in respect of punishment following conviction of a director of a company which failed to keep adequate accounting records. These are set out as follows under section 730, Schedule 24 of the Companies Act 1985.

Section of the Act	*General nature of the offence*	*Mode of prosecution*	*Punishment*
S 221(5) or 222(4)	Company failing to keep accounting records (liabilities of the officers)	1. On indictment 2. Summary	2 years or a fine: or both 6 months or the statutory maximum, £5,000; or both
S 222(6)	Officer of company failing to secure compliance with, or intentionally causing default under section 222(5) (preservation of accounting records for requisite number of years)	1. On indictment 2. Summary	2 years or a fine: or both 6 months or the statutory maximum, £5,000; or both

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many company directors were found guilty of approving accounts which did not comply with the Companies Act 1985 in each year since 1987. [61954]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* There were no prosecutions for the years 1987–1998 under the provisions of section 223(5) of the Companies Act 1985, as amended.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what was the average fine levied on a company director convicted of approving accounts which did not comply with the requirements of the Companies Act 1985 in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997; [61949]

(2) how many directors were fined in 1997, and for what amounts, for approving accounts which did not comply with the requirements of the Companies Act 1985; [61952]

(3) how many company directors have been fined, and for what amounts, for approving accounts which did not comply with the requirements of the Companies Act 1985 in each year since 1987. [61950]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* There is no record of any company directors being fined for approving accounts which did not comply with the requirements of the Companies Act 1985 for the years in question.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what is the maximum punishment for conviction as a director of a company which fails to file an annual return which discloses the names of the directors and owners of the company within 28 days of its due date under section 363 of the Companies Act 1985; [61961]

(2) what is the maximum punishment following conviction for being a director of a company which fails to file financial accounts with Companies House within (i) seven months and (ii) 10 months of the end of the period of account; [61948]

(3) what is the maximum punishment for a company which does not disclose to the public that a director has *(a)* been appointed and *(b)* resigned within two weeks of that resignation under section 288 of the Companies Act 1985. [61960]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* A fine of up to £5,000 (the statutory maximum).

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many company directors have been *(a)* imprisoned or *(b)* fined over the last 10 years for approving accounts which do not comply with the requirements of the Companies Act 1985; and what is the maximum (i) prison sentence and (ii) fine which may be imposed. [61958]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* There have been no instances in the last ten years of fines or imprisonment of company directors for offences, in relation to approval of accounts that do not comply with the requirements of the Companies Act 1985. There are no provisions to imprison directors who fail to comply and the amount of fine is not specified.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) how many company directors were (i) found guilty and (ii) fined for failing to file an annual return which disclosed the names of the directors and owners of the company within 28 days of its due date under section 363 of the Companies Act 1985 in each year since 1987; [61947]

(2) how many company directors were fined for being a director of a company which failed to file financial accounts with Companies House within *(a)* seven months and *(b)* 10 months of the end of the period of account in each year since 1987; [61957]

(3) how many company directors were found guilty of failing to file financial accounts with Companies House within (i) seven months and (ii) 10 months of the end of the period of account in each year since 1987; and how many were fined. [61956]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* There are no figures available to answer pq 61956 and pq 61957. However, the total number of directors convicted each year since 1987 for failing to deliver annual returns and/or accounts on time to the Registrar are as follows:

Year	*Number*
1987–88	1,574
1988–89	1,178
1989–90	1,635
1990–91	1,962
1991–92	1,716
1992–93	1,915
1993–94	1,285
1994–95	987
1995–96	636
1996–97	695
1997–98	745

There are no figures available to show the number of directors convicted and fined during the years concerned for failing to deliver annual returns only.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many company directors have been found guilty of failing to keep adequate accounting records in each year since 1987; and what penalties were imposed. [61953]

Dr. Howells: The number of company directors that have been prosecuted for failure to keep or preserve accounting records in accordance with sections 221–223 of the Companies Act 1985 were:

S 221–223 failure to keep or preserve accounting records

Year	*Offence*	*Prosecutions*	*Convictions*	*Numbers of charges where a conviction was not obtained*
1997–98	S 221–223	134	64	70
1996–97	S 221–223	71	38	33
1995–96	S 221–223	32	22	10
1994–95	S 221–223	68	33	35
1993–94	S 221–223	118	61	57
1992–93	S 221–223	171	105	66
1991–92	S 221–223	118	69	49
1990–91	S 221–223	99	71	28
1989–90	S 221–223	116	93	23
1988–89	S 221–223	90	77	13

Statistics for earlier periods are not available and to research this information would involve disproportionate cost. Similarly there are no available records which show the level of penalties imposed for the above years. To research and gather this information would involve reference to a number of sources, such as records of Magistrate's Courts, and again the work involved would be disproportionate.

Lear Corporation

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what Government grants or assistance has been requested by the Lear Corporation since 1996. [62293]

Mr. Battle: No publicly announced grants or assistance are on record.

Business Fees

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Government will announce the fee to be charged to businesses under the proposals in the Competition Bill. [62195]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Any decision on fees will be made in good time before the new prohibition regime is brought into force on 1 March 2000 and following the statutory consultation prescribed in the Competition Act 1998.

Postage Costs

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the cost of *(a)* first class and *(b)* second class postage in each of the last 20 years, adjusted to 1998 prices. [62309]

Mr. Ian McCartney: I understand from the Post Office that first and second class postage rates in each of the last 20 years adjusted to 1998 prices were as follows:

Pence

Year	*1st Class*	*2nd Class*
1978	29.3	22.8
1979	26.9	21.2
1980	28.8	23.9
1981	30.2	24.8
1982	30.8	24.9
1983	30.4	23.9
1984	29.8	23.1
1985	29.2	22.1
1986	28.6	20.3
1987	28.7	20.8
1988	27.9	20.3
1989	27.2	20.1
1990	26.5	20.1
1991	27.5	21.1
1992	28.2	21.1
1993	27.9	21.0
1994	28.2	21.4
1995	27.3	20.7
1996	27.2	20.8
1997	26.8	20.7
1998	26.0	20.0

Minimum Wage

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will publish the results of the consultation on the draft regulations implementing the minimum wage which ended on 6 November. [62978]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Our final proposals for the National Minimum Wage Regulations will be presented to the House for approval shortly.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to reduce the minimum wage payable by those employers who make full board and lodging available to their employees. [62982]

Mr. Ian McCartney: We have no plans to reduce the level of the national minimum wage. We are considering representations on the deductions that could be made in respect of accommodation provided by employers made to us during the consultation process on the draft National Minimum Wage Regulations. The Regulations will be presented to the House for approval shortly.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has had from British Activities Holidays Association in respect of the minimum wage; and if he will make a statement. [62979]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government have received a number of representations from the British Activity Holidays Association about the national minimum wage.

We have consulted business, employees and others with an interest on the draft National Minimum Wage Regulations. We have listened to the concerns expressed and this will be reflected in our final proposals to be announced shortly. The Regulations will be presented to the House for approval.

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what factors led him to set the accommodation deductor in the draft national minimum wage regulations at its current level. [62939]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government accepted in principle the advice of the Low Pay Commission on the amounts which could be offset against the national minimum wage, subject to the practicalities of implementation and the draft National Minimum Wage regulations reflect that position. The maximum amount the Commission recommended to be offset for accommodation only was £20 per week.

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received on the issue of the draft national minimum wage regulations accommodation deductor; and if he will make a statement. [62940]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government have received a number of representations on the draft National Minimum Wage Regulation dealing with the treatment of deductions in respect of accommodation provided by the employer.

We have consulted business, employees and others with an interest on the draft National Minimum Wage Regulations. We have listened to the concerns expressed and our final proposals will be presented to the House for approval shortly.

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to lay before the House the statutory instrument regarding the national minimum wage regulations. [62938]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The statutory instrument to implement the National Minimum Wage regulations will be presented to the House for approval shortly.

Confiscated Assets

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps the Government are taking to return to victims of Nazi persecution assets which were confiscated in the United Kingdom by Her Majesty's Government under trading with the enemy legislation. [63042]

Mr. Mandelson: This Government are revolted by the treatment meted out by the Nazis to Jews and other minorities during the Second World War. We have the greatest sympathy for the victims and their relatives. This is why, in June 1998, we appointed the right hon. the Lord Archer of Sandwell QC to advise on a Scheme for determining claims from victims of Nazi persecution for the return of assets, where practicable and subject to validation, placed in the UK, which were confiscated by HM Government during the Second World War. We have now received Lord Archer's recommendations and I am pleased to confirm that the Government will quickly put in place a Claims Scheme based on them. A copy of the Government's response to Lord Archer's main recommendations has been placed in the Library of the House.

The Scheme will have the following main features: any victims of Nazi persecution who had assets in the UK confiscated by HM Government under the Trading with the Enemy legislation, and who have not already been compensated, will be eligible to make a claim; the Government will pay compensation at today's values in respect of valid claims to the original owners or their heirs; and claims will be determined by a panel of three independent Assessors comprising a legal Chair; someone with financial expertise; and someone with an understanding of belonging to a minority group.

This Government are aware that time is of the essence to victims of Nazi persecution and their families. We shall therefore establish the Claims Scheme as a matter of urgency so that claims for compensation may be met as soon as possible. The terms of reference of the assessors, a claims form and guidance on how to apply will be made available as soon as is practicable.

My Department has already received a number of potential claims and we shall be writing to these individuals to inform them of the procedure. We shall also be updating my Department's enemy property website, adding further lists of names and details of the Claims Scheme as they emerge. We are also in touch with the main interest groups and together with them we shall ensure that the Scheme gets the widest publicity.

I am grateful to Lord Archer for proposing a solution which allows the Government to meet the claims of victims of Nazi persecution while addressing the real practical problems of meeting the standards of propriety expected in public expenditure in circumstances some fifty years after the event. The UK owes victims of Nazi persecution a debt of honour. That debt can now be repaid.

Gas Consumers

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent consultations he has held with the Council of Registered Gas Installers concerning the interests of gas consumers; and if he will make a statement. [62399]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* I met the Council of Registered Gas Installers on 24 November, to discuss a number of matters relating to the safe use of gas by domestic consumers.

Oil Industry

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when the Director General of Fair Trading will complete his review of the undertakings given by oil companies in 1966; and if he will arrange to publish this review when he receives it. [62402]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* I expect to receive the Director General of Fair Trading's advice following his review of the petrol undertakings around the end of the year. The Director General's advice is confidential.

Petrol Industry

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what conclusions he has reached on the Director General of Fair Trading's report on the wholesale and retail petrol market, published on 18 May. [62403]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The Director General of Fair Trading, in his 18 May report on competition in the supply of petrol in the UK, concluded that the market is competitive and working to the benefit of consumers. It is for the Director General to decide whether or not to make a reference to the Monopolies and Mergers Commission. He decided on the basis of his report that a reference of this market was not justified.

Better Payment Practice Group

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many businesses and organisations to date have joined the Better Payment Practice Group. [63111]

Mrs. Roche: The Better Payment Practice Group was established in October 1997 as an integral part of the Government's commitment to work in partnership with the private sector to bring about an improved payment culture in the UK. The role of the Group is to help shape and influence the private and public sectors' efforts to tackle the problem of late payment as well as informing the work of other organisations and sectors on this issue.

Since it began 18 representative organisations have accepted invitations to join the Better Payment Practice Group from the small firms, banking, factoring, trade credit insurance, credit management, accountancy profession and credit services sectors to look at this important issue. A key achievement for the Group has been the launch of its campaign in October this year to highlight the economic benefits that can be derived from paying on time.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the businesses and organisations which have refused invitations to join the Better Payment Practice Group. [63112]

Mrs. Roche: The Better Payment Practice Group was formed in October 1997 as a partnership between the public and private sector to bring about an improved payment culture in the UK. Since it was established no organisation invited to join the Group has refused the offer of a place.

This 100 per cent. take-up rate reflects the importance which both the private and public sectors attach to addressing the difficulties caused as a result of late payment of commercial debts.

Small Arms Exports

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the quantity of small arms exported in each of the last five years and their destination; and what *(a)* quantity and *(b)* proportion were exported to a country at war or which was at war within a year of the arms being exported. [61661]

Dawn Primarolo: I have been asked to reply.

The information is not held in the form requested and obtaining it could be done only at disproportionate cost.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Criminal Legal Aid

34. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what are *(a)* the budgets and *(b)* the priorities for criminal legal aid in (i) 1997–98, (ii) 1998–99 and (iii) 1999–2000. [61257]

Mr. Hoon: There is no separate budget for criminal legal aid. However, in 1997–98, the cost of criminal legal aid, including advice and assistance, was £733 million. This year expenditure is expected to be around £800 million while next year it is expected to rise to £840 million.

Our priority continues to be that criminal legal aid should enable criminal justice to be dispensed fairly, effectively and without undue delay. Our proposals for contracts at fixed prices would reward efficient lawyers and provide better control over expenditure and quality.

Court Closures

35. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many courts have closed since May 1997; and how many new ones have opened. [61258]

Mr. Hoon: I am aware of 29 magistrates courthouses closures since May 1997. It is possible that other closures have occurred following a decision by a local magistrates courts committee against which no appeal has been lodged. The Lord Chancellor has a role in magistrates courthouse closures only where an appeal has been made. Three new magistrates courthouses have opened at South Shields, Chippenham and Tameside.

Since May 1997, eight county courts have closed. There have been four court buildings opened since May 1997: Swansea County Court (June 1997), Oldham County Court (November 1997), the Immigration Appellate Authority (March 1998) and Principal Registry of the Family Division (June 1998).

38. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what plans he has to provide additional resources to boroughs which no longer have court services; and if he will make a statement. [61262]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor's Department makes grants to local authorities towards current and capital expenditure incurred by them on behalf of the magistrates courts committee for their area. The overall level of expenditure allowed to be incurred, and thereby the amount of grant due to be paid, is determined by this Department.

The formula used to calculate the amount of current grant to be paid to each local authority is under review. It has been agreed, pending the completion of this review, that each local authority will receive, in cash terms, a 1.5 per cent. increase in their grant allocation for 1999–2000 over 1998–99.

The Department has made no specific plans to provide additional resources to local authorities during 1998–99, with the exception of those areas where there are amalgamations of magistrates courts committees which may bid for additional resources towards any transitional additional costs resulting from that amalgamation. It is always open to a magistrates courts committee, in conjunction with its local authority, to bid for additional resources from this Department.

Epping Magistrates Court

36. **Mrs. Laing:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received on the future of Epping Magistrates Court. [61259]

Mr. Hoon: I considered three representations on the future of the Epping Magistrates Court, before approving the application made by the Essex Magistrates Courts Committee for the reorganisation of its petty sessional divisions.

I understand from the Justices' Chief Executive for the Essex Magistrates Courts Committee that the Committee has no proposals to close the Epping Magistrates Court.

Witness Support Schemes

37. **Mr. Bayley:** To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement about the contribution made by witness support schemes to the administration of magistrates courts. [61260]

Mr. Hoon: Witness support schemes give information about court procedures, arrange with the court pre-court familiarisation visits and provide separate waiting facilities on the day of the witness's court appearances, and give emotional support. The Government are committed to improving witness services in the magistrates courts, reflecting the considerable importance that is attached to the welfare of witnesses in the criminal courts.

Judicial Appointments Commission

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make it his policy to establish a judicial appointments commission. [61253]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor announced in October 1997 that, given the priority of other radical reforms, work on a judicial appointments commission would not proceed for the time being. He has made significant changes to the appointments process, including the extension of advertising of vacancies to include High Court appointments; more flexibility in part-time sitting arrangements to encourage applications, in particular from women; and an increase in the upper age limit for appointment as Assistant Recorders and lay magistrates in order to widen the field of applicants.

Worthing County Court

Mr. Flight: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what representations he has received about the proposed closure of Worthing County Court; and if he will make a statement. [61250]

Mr. Hoon: The hon. Member for Worthing, West (Mr. Bottomley) and the Worthing Law Society have written separately to the Lord Chancellor. Before any consideration is given to closure, court users will be asked for their views early in the New Year.

Rights of Audience

Dr. Cable: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what steps are being taken to extend rights of audience before the courts for solicitors and employed barristers. [61251]

Mr. Hoon: The Access to Justice Bill includes provisions to give all solicitors and barristers full rights of audience before all the courts, provided they meet the training and conduct requirements imposed by their professional bodies. The Bill proposes to give employed barristers and solicitors, including Crown Prosecutors, the same rights of audience as their colleagues in private practice.

SCOTLAND

Special Adviser

8. **Miss Kirkbride:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many special advisers are employed in his Department; and what is the total cost to public funds in the current financial year. [61271]

19. **Mr. Grieve:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the total cost to public funds of employing special advisers in his Department in the last 12 months for which figures are available. [61282]

Mr. Dewar: There are three Special Advisers employed in my Department. Their salaries are negotiated individually and are confidential within the three-band range announced to the House by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office on 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *354–55*.

Beef

10. **Mr. Swinney:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met the NFU in Scotland to discuss the promotion of Scottish beef. [61273]

Mr. Dewar: I have met the farming industry several times in recent months and discussed the promotion of Scottish beef and other matters with the President of the Scottish NFU when I met him on 24 November 1998.

Regaining export markets for Scotch beef is vital and my noble Friend Lord Sewel is working closely with the industry. But it is not the only opportunity for our Scottish industry; I want to help the farming industry secure a healthy sustainable future. My noble Friend and I will meet the Scottish NFU and other organisations on 22 December to launch discussions on the way ahead for the Scottish farming industry and related sectors.

Vehicle Excise Duty

11. **Mr. Burns:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has made to the Treasury regarding proposals for varying the vehicle excise duty in Scotland. [61274]

Mr. Macdonald: I very much welcome my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer's commitment to make payment of Vehicle Excise Duty fairer for owners of lower emission cars. I encourage interested parties in Scotland to contribute their views.

Health Service

12. **Mr. Eric Clarke:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the planned expenditure on the health service in Scotland. [61275]

Mr. Galbraith: Net expenditure on the Health Service in Scotland is planned to be £4.6 billion in 1998–99. Following the Comprehensive Spending Review an extra £1.8 billion is planned to be spent over the period 1999–2000 to 2001–02. Planned spending next year will be at a record high of £4.9 billion or about £960 per head.

Scottish Parliament

13. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received regarding elections to the Scottish Parliament. [61276]

Mr. Dewar: Since the publication of the White Paper, "Scotland's Parliament", last year we have received many representations on a wide range of issues to do with the elections to the Scottish Parliament.

21. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects the Scottish Parliament to sit for the first time. [61284]

Mr. McLeish: Section 2 of the Scotland Act 1998 provides that the date of the Parliament's first sitting will be prescribed in an order by the Secretary of State. My right hon. Friend will make an announcement on this in due course, but we expect that the Parliament will first meet a few days after the elections on 6 May.

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to review the method by which additional members of the Scottish parliament will be elected. [62087]

Mr. McLeish: The electoral system for the Scottish Parliament is set out in the Scotland Act 1998, which received Royal Assent on 19 November. We have no plans to review this.

Farmers (Assistance)

14. **Mr. Maclean:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures he will take to assist farmers in Scotland. [61277]

Mr. Macdonald: Assistance is currently running at record levels. Last year, direct payments to Scottish farmers totalled almost half a billion pounds and latest indications are that a similar amount will be recorded for 1998. Throughout this year we have implemented a range of additional measures and these have been worth about £50 million. On 16 November, a further £36 million was approved for payment early next year.

Strategic Defence Review

15. **Mr. Jim Murphy:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the impact of the strategic defence review on Scotland. [61278]

Mr. Dewar: I welcome the outcomes of this Review conducted by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence. It ensures that Scotland will continue to play a prominent role in meeting Britain's defence requirements.

Office for National Statistics

16. **Mr. Savidge:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the status which the Office for National Statistics kitemark carries on official documents published by the Scottish Office. [61279]

Mr. Dewar: ONS does not operate a kitemarking scheme. Some Scottish Office publications bear the logo of the Government Statistical Service (GSS). The logo is not used for publications which are not prepared on behalf of the GSS, or where the content of a publication is set out in statute.

The Scottish Office is committed to adhering to the Official Statistics Code of Practice in all statistical work, whether or not carried out on behalf of GSS.

New Parliament Building

17. **Mr. Forth:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the latest estimate of the cost of the new Parliament building. [61280]

Mr. McLeish: The construction costs of the new Scottish Parliament building at Holyrood continue to be estimated at around £55 million including site acquisition and demolition costs but not including fees and VAT.

EU Enlargement

18. **Mr. Hood:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last visited the European Parliament to discuss the implications for Scotland of EU enlargement. [61281]

Mr. Macdonald: I visited the European Parliament in June of this year while my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met the President of the European Parliament when he visited Scotland on 3–4 December. On both occasions the issues discussed included EU enlargement.

Funding Transfers

20. **Mr. Ian Bruce:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to transfer funding from local authorities in Scotland to the Scottish Parliament. [61283]

Mr. McLeish: My right hon. Friend has no such plans.

Anti-drugs Strategy

22. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on progress with the Government's anti-drugs strategy in Scotland following the appointment of the United Kingdom anti-drugs co-ordinator. [61285]

Mr. Galbraith: Following the publication of the White Paper "Tackling Drugs to Build a Better Britain", my right hon. Friend and I have asked the Scottish Advisory Committee on Drug Misuse and the Drug Action Teams in Scotland to consider further development of the Government's drugs strategy for Scotland.

We expect to issue an enhanced drugs strategy framework for Scotland in the first part of 1999.

Domestic Abuse

23. **Miss Begg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action the Government are taking to protect the victims of domestic abuse. [61286]

Mrs. Liddell: Tackling domestic violence is a priority for the Scottish Office. We are taking action on 3 fronts.

We have established a Scottish Partnership on Domestic Violence which met for the first time on 23 November under the chairmanship of Anne Smith QC.

On 13 November we issued a consultation document entitled "Preventing Violence Against Women: A Scottish Office Action Plan". This contained 27 Action Points.

We are also preparing a new awareness raising campaign which will begin at Christmas and roll out over the next 3 years.

Home Ownership

24. **Mr. Bercow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on levels of home ownership in Scotland. [61287]

Mr. Macdonald: The estimate for December 1997 recently published in the Scottish Office Statistical Bulletin (Housing Series), is that, 60.2 per cent. of all dwellings in Scotland are owner-occupied.

Farming Support

25. **Mr. Russell Brown:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met representatives of the farming industry to discuss support for Scottish farms. [61289]

Mr. Macdonald: Support for the agricultural industry was one of the matters discussed when my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State last met representatives of the farming industry on 24 November.

Further Education

26. **Mrs. Irene Adams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what additional resources have been channelled into further education since 1 May 1997. [61290]

Mrs. Liddell: The Government have been able to make available to the further education (FE) sector in 1997–98 and 1998–99 £12.4 million more than the planning figures set by the previous Administration. This is in spite of the Government's commitment to operate within the overall spending limits planned by the previous Administration for the period.

Further education in Scotland is to receive a massive boost over the next three years, as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review. In total, the FE budget will receive an additional £214 million over the period, to support further increases in student numbers, promote wider access to FE, improve quality and standards, and stabilise the financial position of the sector.

Higher Still

27. **Mr. Worthington:** To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what action the Government are taking to ensure that Higher Still proceeds on time. [61291]

Mrs. Liddell: We are on course to introduce the first Higher Still courses in 1999. Over £24 million is being provided over the three year period up to 2001–02 to help classroom teachers implement Higher Still. This is in addition to the £20 million which will have been directly invested in Higher Still by the time the first classes start in 1999. An unprecedented level of support materials and national training is also being provided, and two additional in-service days have been granted for local training.

In addition, I have set up a Liaison Group consisting of representatives from teaching unions, local authorities, further education and parents' organisations, to discuss detailed arrangements for the phasing of Higher Still in 1999–2000. The Group will also consider other topics of concern identified by members.

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he last met representatives of the Education Institute of Scotland to discuss the implementation of Higher Still. [61288]

Mrs. Liddell: I had a positive and constructive meeting with representatives of the EIS on 24 November. This resulted in the EIS suspending its boycott of preparations for Higher Still and joining the Liaison Group which I have set up to agree the detailed arrangements for the rephasing of Higher Still in 1999–2000.

Parliamentary Constituencies

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to review the rules that will determine the number of Scottish parliamentary constituencies. [62086]

Mr. McLeish: Section 86 of the Scotland Act removes the current requirement in the Parliamentary Constituencies Act 1986 for there to be a minimum number of Scottish constituencies, so that this requirement will not apply at future reviews of parliamentary boundaries in Scotland. Section 86 further provides that the electoral quota for Scotland will in future be the same as that for England. I have no plans for any further review of these provisions.

Racism

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures is he taking to combat racism in Scotland. [62088]

Mr. McLeish: The Government are firmly committed to combating racism in all its forms. In Scotland, we have taken steps to meet the Government's commitment to put racial equality at the heart of our policy agenda by introducing new measures in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 to deal with racially aggravated offences; working with key agencies such as the NHS and the Employment Service to make services more accessible to minority communities; and promoting racial equality projects through funding the Ethnic Minority Grant Scheme. The Scottish Social Inclusion Strategy recognises the exclusion that some minority communities face, and we have made equal opportunity a key principle to underpin the Scottish Parliament so that it can be responsive to the whole range of Scottish society.

I plan to meet the Commission for Racial Equality shortly to discuss how we can work together to raise the profile of racial equality in Scotland as we look ahead to the Parliament. In addition, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland has demonstrated his own personal commitment to racial equality by signing up to the Commission's Leadership Challenge.

SSSIs and National Parks

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he will publish the findings of the consultation exercise concerning reform of SSSIs and national parks. [62255]

Mr. Macdonald: The Scottish Office is currently considering responses to the consultation paper "People and Nature: A New Approach to SSSI Designations in Scotland". My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland expects to make an announcement in the early part of next year.

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) recently consulted on proposals for National Parks appropriate to Scottish circumstances. The responses to the consultation will be taken into account by SNH in the advice that it provides to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland. It is intended that SNH publish its advice in the early part of next year.

Devolution (Concordats)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many concordats remain to be published; and if he will make a statement. [62186]

Mr. McLeish: Work is progressing on concordats both within the Scottish Office and in Whitehall Departments. None of them has yet been published.

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is his e-mail address. [62564]

Mr. Dewar: Electronic mail for me should be sent to scottish.secretary@scotland.gov.uk. This address is published on the home page of The Scottish Office Website.

School Toilets

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many schools have outside toilets *(a)* in each education authority and *(b)* in Scotland. [62648]

Mrs. Liddell: The information is not collected centrally.

Teachers

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many *(a)* pupils and *(b)* full-time equivalent teachers there were in each education authority in (i) primary schools and (ii) secondary schools; and in each case what the pupil-teacher ratio (1) was in 1997 and (2) is currently. [62649]

Mrs. Liddell: The information requested is set out in the tables.

Pupils and teachers in publicly funded primary schools, September 1997

Education authority	*Schools*	*Pupils*	*Teachers (FTE)*	*Pupil/ teacher ratio*
Scotland	2,300	440,594	22,187	19.9
Aberdeen City	61	15,921	795	20.0
Aberdeenshire	160	21,526	1,127	19.1
Angus	62	9,381	490	19.1
Argyll and Bute	87	7,792	447	17.4
Clackmannanshire	19	4,542	216	21.0
Dumfries and Galloway	116	12,944	678	19.1
Dundee City	41	12,360	650	19.0
East Ayrshire	47	11,449	538	21.3
East Dunbartonshire	37	10,653	479	22.2
East Lothian	35	7,942	398	20.0
East Renfrewshire	24	8,596	384	22.4
Edinburgh, City of	103	30,590	1,491	20.5
Eilean Siar[1]	43	2,556	197	13.0
Falkirk	48	12,334	587	21.0
Fife	146	30,870	1,625	19.0
Glasgow City	204	49,439	2,458	20.1
Highland	191	19,149	1,078	17.8
Inverclyde	32	7,826	365	21.4
Midlothian	36	7,433	377	19.7
Moray	49	8,078	418	19.3
North Ayrshire	52	12,614	596	21.2
North Lanarkshire	134	29,831	1,472	20.3
Orkney Islands	22	1,846	124	14.9
Perth and Kinross	78	10,776	572	18.8
Renfrewshire	52	15,796	715	22.1
Scottish Borders	72	8,969	486	18.5
Shetland Islands	34	2,335	184	12.7
South Ayrshire	45	9,490	449	21.1
South Lanarkshire	125	26,846	1,285	20.9
Stirling	45	6,897	351	19.6
West Dunbartonshire	35	8,890	425	20.9
West Lothian	65	14,923	732	20.4

[1] Formerly known as the Western Isles

Pupils and teachers in publicly funded secondary schools, September 1997

Education authority	*Schools*	*Pupils* [1]	*Adults*	*Teachers (FTE)*	*Pupil/teacher ratio* [1]
Scotland	401	314,916	2,044	23,875	13.2
Aberdeen City	13	11,138	2	861	12.9
Aberdeenshire	16	15,114	5	1,110	13.6
Angus	9	7,262	24	568	12.8

Pupils and teachers in publicly funded secondary schools, September 1997

Education authority	*Schools*	*Pupils* [1]	*Adults*	*Teachers (FTE)*	*Pupil/teacher ratio* [1]
Argyll and Bute	10	5,614	30	446	12.6
Clackmannanshire	3	2,951	9	220	13.4
Dumfries and Galloway	16	9,600	47	792	12.1
Dundee City	10	8,983	2	687	13.1
East Ayrshire	10	7,926	13	586	13.5
East Dunbartonshire	9	8,664	7	615	14.1
East Lothian	6	4,853	9	359	13.5
East Renfrewshire	7	6,789	15	483	14.1
Edinburgh, City of	23	18,714	1,198	1,388	13.5
Eilean Siar[2]	13	2,030	8	218	9.3
Falkirk	8	8,619	4	663	13.0
Fife	19	22,938	32	1,707	13.4
Glasgow City	39	29,952	68	2,227	13.4
Highland	28	14,864	62	1,259	11.8
Inverclyde	8	5,906	4	437	13.5
Midlothian	6	5,368	4	405	13.3
Moray	9	5,700	19	454	12.6
North Ayrshire	10	9,155	63	673	13.6
North Lanarkshire	26	23,057	38	1,705	13.5
Orkney Islands	6	1,425	2	136	10.5
Perth and Kinross	10	7,507	13	594	12.6
Renfrewshire	14	11,641	17	837	13.9
Scottish Borders	9	6,494	42	530	12.3
Shetland Islands	9	1,594	0	210	7.6
South Ayrshire	9	7,875	55	581	13.6
South Lanarkshire	21	20,705	152	1,484	14.0
Stirling	7	5,598	0	427	13.1
West Dunbartonshire	7	6,871	88	477	14.4
West Lothian	11	10,099	12	736	13.6

[1] Excluding adults
[2] Formerly known as the Western Isles

Provisional results of the 1998 school census
Publicly funded schools in Scotland, at September 1998;
number of pupils by sector and education authority [1]

	Primary	*Secondary*		*Special*
Education authority	*Total pupils*	*Total pupils*	*Total adults* [2]	*Total pupils based*
Scotland	437,239	314,228	1,729	8,149
Aberdeen City	15,833	11,059	24	458
Aberdeenshire	21,550	15,331	1	356
Angus	9,300	7,274	14	0
Argyll and Bute	7,810	5,589	35	55
Clackmannanshire	4,512	2,952	4	58
Dumfries and Galloway	12,957	9,617	46	28
Dundee City	12,103	8,873	5	180
East Ayrshire	11,233	8,022	8	178
East Dunbartonshire	10,617	8,620	0	140
East Lothian	8,040	4,872	9	0
East Renfrewshire	8,727	6,953	3	43
Edinburgh, City of	30,330	19,047	850	991
Eilean Siar[1]	2,453	1,983	2	0
Falkirk	12,421	8,534	36	325
Fife	30,456	22,733	24	250
Glasgow City	48,071	29,350	37	2,040
Highland	19,031	14,885	49	164
Inverclyde	7,625	5,753	0	127
Midlothian	7,430	5,371	75	174
Moray	8,043	5,714	19	23
North Ayrshire	12,578	9,057	36	206
North Lanarkshire	29,600	22,884	19	785
Orkney Islands	1,831	1,399	0	15
Perth and Kinross	10,895	7,646	9	53
Renfrewshire	15,562	11,727	4	369
Scottish Borders	8,969	6,622	44	0
Shetland Islands	2,365	1,594	4	0
South Ayrshire	9,404	7,814	24	104
South Lanarkshire	26,902	20,371	130	601

Provisional results of the 1998 school census
Publicly funded schools in Scotland, at September 1998;
number of pupils by sector and education authority [1]

	Primary	*Secondary*		*Special*
Education authority	*Total pupils*	*Total pupils*	*Total adults* [2]	*Total pupils based*
Stirling	6,924	5,618	0	67
West Dunbartonshire	8,839	6,792	77	184
West Lothian	14,878	10,172	141	175

[1] Provisional
[2] Adults attending day education classes
Note:
Publicly funded schools comprise education authority, self governing and grant aided schools

Education Expenditure

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what was the average per capita spending *(a)* in each education authority and *(b)* in Scotland in (i) primary schools and (ii) secondary schools on (1) books, (2) computer equipment and (3) other education materials and equipment in the most recent three years for which figures are available. [62647]

Mrs. Liddell: The available information is given in the following tables which have been compiled from local authority financial returns. Details for 1994–95 and 1995–96 are under the council areas then applicable, whereas the table for 1996–97 reflects the current local authority structure. There can be variations in the recording of expenditure under the two headings. It is, therefore, possible that some expenditure on books may be included

under expenditure on equipment or vice versa. Expenditure on computer equipment is not identified separately in local authority returns to The Scottish Office for the years in question.

Expenditure per pupil on text and library books and on educational tools, equipment and materials

£ (outturn prices)

Year 1994–95	*Primary*		*Secondary*	
Region	*Books*	*Equipment*	*Books*	*Equipment*
Borders	0.00	68.18	0.00	153.75
Central	0.65	34.63	2.60	91.87
Dumfries and Galloway	16.30	65.44	10.99	135.84
Fife	21.44	5.91	58.77	19.47
Grampian	0.00	56.30	0.00	132.05
Highland	32.58	33.16	54.43	47.46
Lothian	19.65	31.76	10.68	76.75
Strathclyde	3.04	39.02	3.83	79.39
Tayside	12.70	33.73	10.80	84.01
Orkney	0.00	58.12	0.00	111.19
Shetland	0.00	89.65	0.00	188.78
Western Isles	29.57	69.12	55.31	85.19

£ (outturn prices)

Year 1995–96	*Primary*		*Secondary*	
Region	*Books*	*Equipment*	*Books*	*Equipment*
Borders	0.00	52.39	0.00	152.73
Central	0.69	34.32	2.65	90.92
Dumfries and Galloway	13.49	57.87	8.51	121.30
Fife	24.88	4.88	67.13	24.97
Grampian	0.00	61.01	0.00	135.61
Highland	32.23	26.48	54.89	40.52
Lothian	19.85	40.87	12.20	80.89
Strathclyde	2.09	49.18	4.70	91.56
Tayside	12.81	32.37	9.55	67.31
Orkney	0.00	66.52	0.00	100.07
Shetland	0.00	92.30	0.00	178.47
Western Isles	32.07	71.78	50.35	83.92

Notes:

1. Not all education authorities distinguish on a consistent basis between the two headings.
2. Where expenditure under one of the headings is shown as £0.00 it should be assumed that the expenditure has been allocated to the other heading.

Expenditure per pupil on text and library books and on educational tools, equipment and materials

£ (outturn prices)

Year 1996–97	*Primary*		*Secondary*	
Council	*Books*	*Equipment*	*Books*	*Equipment*
Aberdeen, City of	0.00	42.13	0.00	73.24
Aberdeenshire	0.00	53.26	0.00	110.46
Angus	0.00	46.11	0.00	89.75
Argyll and Bute	5.12	90.66	14.07	102.94
Clackmannanshire	0.00	35.13	0.00	83.36
Comhairle Nan Eilean Sair	19.32	86.94	49.86	82.62
Dumfries and Galloway	14.98	58.46	9.78	103.19
Dundee, City of	3.90	38.10	4.91	58.67
East Ayrshire	0.00	44.49	0.00	93.81
East Dunbartonshire	5.14	38.46	12.57	75.85
East Lothian	0.00	58.21	0.00	83.37
East Renfrewshire	47.43	0.00	122.52	0.00
Edinburgh, City of	20.46	52.51	11.50	105.83
Falkirk	1.79	35.65	2.54	87.46
Fife	9.01	23.24	9.67	75.11
Glasgow, City of	1.46	31.36	4.38	74.87
Highland	0.00	62.78	0.00	107.30
Inverclyde	5.54	32.98	11.43	74.48
Midlothian	15.96	15.96	12.96	46.27
Moray	0.00	3.11	2.30	19.13
North Ayrshire	3.09	33.02	11.00	70.57
North Lanarkshire	0.00	51.25	0.00	93.82
Orkney Islands	0.00	66.56	0.00	75.69
Perth and Kinross	12.28	26.43	11.01	41.17
Renfrewshire	7.14	44.73	13.79	94.72
Scottish Borders	0.00	49.87	0.00	72.89
Shetland Islands	0.00	80.30	0.00	175.89
South Ayrshire	3.15	37.67	7.39	78.94
South Lanarkshire	4.35	35.62	8.84	66.43
Stirling	2.09	46.89	1.42	111.05
West Dunbartonshire	0.00	32.83	0.00	75.30
West Lothian	20.91	28.45	12.11	47.84

Notes:

1. Not all education authorities distinguish on a consistent basis between the two headings.
2. Where expenditure under one of the headings is shown as £0.00 it should be assumed that the expenditure has been allocated to the other heading.

Scottish Members of Parliament

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received on his proposal to reduce the number of hon. Members for Scottish constituencies; and if he will make a statement. [61270]

Mr. McLeish: We recognise that the creation of the Scottish Parliament means that the present level of Scottish representation at Westminster cannot be maintained, a view which has received very broad support.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

China

Mr. Alan Johnson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the human rights situation in China; and what has been the impact of United Kingdom and European Union policy. [63146]

Mr. Fatchett: We continue to have many serious concerns about human rights in China. During his visit to China earlier this year my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary raised these concerns with Chinese leaders, as did my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister. Recently, the Chinese Government has taken some positive steps in this field, which we have welcomed, while repeating our desire to address issues of concern through the continuing bilateral and EU/China Human Rights Dialogues.

Since the commencement of the bilateral UK/China Dialogue, and the resumption of the EU/China Human Rights Dialogue, last year, China has taken several positive steps which will bring about its closer integration into the UN human rights system, and should in time help to strengthen protection of human rights in China. It has signed the International Covenants on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic Social and Cultural Rights; agreed to report to the UN on Hong Kong under these two Covenants; admitted the UN High Commissioner for

Human Rights, Mrs. Robinson, as well as the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; and welcomed a possible visit by the UN Special Rapporteur on Torture.

In addition, China has allowed a visit by a delegation of EU Troika Ambassadors to Tibet and accepted the participation in the Dialogue of critical NGOs such as Amnesty International. It is also noteworthy that the Dialogue has allowed us to discuss privately and frankly with the Chinese authorities a range of concerns from Tibet, to the death penalty, freedom of association and torture.

Both Britain and the EU have now established substantial co-operation programmes with China, funded respectively by DFID and the Commission, and these seek among other things to promote judicial exchanges and legal reform.

We shall encourage the Chinese Government to ratify the International Human Rights Covenants, with as few reservations as possible, as soon as possible. We want to see further reform in China's capital punishment regime, leading ultimately to abolition, as well as improvements in its systems of detention. At the same time we shall continue to raise the cases of individuals, as we did on 2 December, when we expressed our concern to the Chinese Government at the recent detention of Mr. Xu Wenli, a prominent dissident. We look forward to discussing these and other points with the Chinese Government.

MI6

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he takes to ensure that former MI6 personnel who take up private sector posts do not utilise information gained whilst employed by MI6 for the advantage of their new employers. [62426]

Mr. Robin Cook: SIS staff are bound by the same conditions as home civil servants and members of HM Diplomatic Service with regard to acceptance of outside appointments after resignation or retirement. These include, where appropriate, reference to the Advisory Committee on Business Appointments, and approval by myself.

Government Hospitality (Wine)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the total expenditure on wine for Government hospitality purposes since 1 May 1997; what is the average cost of each bottle purchased; and what percentage of wine purchased is of UK origin. [62422]

Mr. Fatchett: The cost of wine purchased for all Government Hospitality purposes from 1 May 1997 to 25 November 1998 was £146,985 inclusive of VAT (the cost of wine purchased for all Government Hospitality purposes from 1 November 1995 to 30 April 1997 was £192,604 inclusive of VAT). The average cost per bottle was £11.72 inclusive of VAT. English and Welsh wines comprised 4 per cent. of the total bought.

Telephone Records

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if telephone records exist that could enable the tracing of external telephone calls from particular extension numbers in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to external numbers on 28 and 29 April. [62440]

Mr. Fatchett: No such records exist.

Mercenaries

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what are the Government's current guidelines on relationships with mercenary companies; and when he will announce new guidelines. [62080]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The current guidelines on FCO official contacts with private military companies are those referred to by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary in his statement to the House on 27 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 21. These guidelines are now being revised in consultation with other Government Departments. The new guidelines will be announced shortly.

Visa Application (Maladministration)

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will name the diplomat criticised in the Ombudsman's recent report relating to maladministration in connection with a visa application by a UK businessman; and for what reasons his Department did not take the action recommended by the Ombudsman. [62948]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The diplomat involved is Sir David Gore-Booth, currently British High Commissioner in New Delhi.

The FCO fully accepts the conclusions in the Ombudsman's report and has apologised to the complainant. In addition the FCO has offered him an ex gratia payment of £5,000 in compensation for the manner in which his complaints were handled.

Sir David Gore-Booth

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the resignation of Sir David Gore-Booth from the Diplomatic Service. [62947]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Sir David Gore-Booth will be leaving the Diplomatic Service on 31 December 1998 in order to take up a post in the Private Sector.

St. Helena

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the present members of the St. Helena Government. [63063]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Subject to the provisions of the St. Helena Constitution Order 1988, the executive authority of St. Helena is exercised on behalf of Her Majesty by the Governor, who is advised by an Executive Council. The Governor is Mr. D. L. Smallman, LVO.

The present members of the Executive Council are:

Hon. T. Richards: Chairman, Agricultural and Natural Resources Committee

Hon. E. W. George: Chairman, Public Health Committee

Hon. S. George: Chairman, Public Works and Service Committee

Hon. R. Robertson: Chairman, Education Committee

Hon. W. Drabble: Chairman, Employment and Social Services Committee

Mr. M. Clancy: Chief Secretary

Mr. M. Young: Financial Secretary

Mr. K. de Freitas: Attorney General.

Currently the hon. Mrs. P. Peters and Mr. J. Siraut are temporary members of the Executive Council during the absence from St. Helena of Councillor Drabble and Mr. Young.

Members of the Legislative Council have an important role to play in the government of St. Helena as legislators and members of the Council Committees which influence policy development.

Idi Amin

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the Government of Saudi Arabia calling for them to expel Idi Amin from their territory. [63097]

Mr. Fatchett: We have no plans to make such representations.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Belfast Harbour

Ms Ward: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what progress has been made by Belfast Harbour Commissioners in developing their proposals for the transfer of the port to the private sector; what consultation there will be on the proposals; and if she will make a statement. [63222]

Marjorie Mowlam: In May this year, the Government conveyed their agreement, in principle, to the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' proposals to transfer the Port to the private sector by means of a placed flotation, with the aim of establishing a private/public partnership, with Government retaining a Golden Share interest. Since then the Commissioners have made good progress in further developing their proposals with the view to submitting a formal Transfer Scheme to the Department, under the terms of the Ports (NI) Order 1994.

This legislation provides for a 6-week public consultation on submission of a Transfer Scheme to the Department. However, local elected representatives have expressed the view that this period is insufficient given the strategic importance of the Port in Northern Ireland context. Following discussions with the Belfast Harbour Commissioners therefore, it has been agreed that the Commissioners will now embark on a consultation process involving local Political Parties and other interested groups, before finalising their proposals and submitting their Transfer Scheme.

It is expected that this further consultation will extend over a 3–4 month period and this means that the final decision on the Commissioners' Transfer Scheme will be taken by the Assembly. I am writing today to each of the Northern Ireland Political parties explaining in more detail the arrangements for the extended consultation process.

Chief Electoral Officer

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will publish the report of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland for 1997–98. [63223]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Chief Electoral Officer's annual report has been laid before Parliament today. Copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

DEFENCE

Tank Transporter (Cenotaph Parade)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what type of transporter the Challenger II tank used in the Whitehall Cenotaph parade on Sunday 15 November was brought into central London; how many axles it had; who owned it; and if he will make a statement. [62082]

Mr. Spellar: The Challenger II tank used in the Whitehall Cenotaph parade on Sunday 15 November was moved by a civilian tractor and low loader trailer unit with 10 axles, owned by Messrs Kings Heavy Haulage of Bristol. The move into and out of Whitehall was conducted in conjunction with the Metropolitan Police and other civil police authorities.

Pay and Personnel Agency

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the outcome of consultation with his Department's trades union officials about the recommendations of the efficiency review of the Pay and Personnel Agency. [63145]

Mr. Spellar: Further to my reply to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) on 28 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *206*, the consultation process is now complete. I have accepted the recommendations of the efficiency review, including the closure of the Worcester office, but in the light of representations made by the Trade Unions I have agreed that the implementation of certain other recommendations from the review should be delayed until later next year. These adjustments to the timetable will help the handling of the important changes in the way the agency conducts its business but will not significantly affect the savings anticipated in the PPA's running costs in the next financial year. The implementation of the review's proposals, especially those concerning the transfer of pensions work from Worcester to Cheadle Hulme, will be sufficiently flexible to ensure the effective transfer of existing skills and will include a contingency to meet any changing demands upon the agency. I am today informing the MOD Trade Unions of my decision.

Defence Diversification

Mr. Beard: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the libraries that hold copies of the submissions received in response to the consultation exercise on defence diversification announced in Cm 3861. [63224]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Microfiche copies of the submissions received have been placed in the Parliamentary Libraries and in the following major libraries.

Westminster Reference Library
35 St. Martin's Street
London
WC2H 7HP

Central Library
George IV Bridge
Edinburgh
EH1 1EG

Central Library
St. David's Link
Frederick Street
Cardiff
CF1 4DT

Central Library
Royal Avenue
Belfast
BT1 1EA

Cambridge Central Library
Reference Section
7 Lion Yard
Cambridge
CB2 3QD

British Library
96 Euston Road
London
NW1 2DB

Central Library
St. Peter's Square
Manchester
M2 5PD

City Library
Princess Square
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE99 1DX

Birmingham Central Library
Chamberlain Square
Birmingham
B3 3HQ

Bath Central Library
The Podium
Northgate Street
Bath
BA1 5AN

Exeter Central Reference Library
Castle Street
Exeter
EX4 3PQ

Bodleian Library
University of Oxford
Broad Street
Oxford.

Depleted Uranium

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what requests his Department has received for the disclosure of papers dated between 6 November 1997 and 17 July 1998 relating to depleted uranium; what response he has given; if he has authorised investigations by MoD police relating to these papers; and if he will make a statement. [63035]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Ministry of Defence has received two requests for copies of documents, dated between 6 November 1997 and 17 July 1998, which relate to depleted uranium. Both requests, which were from the same individual, are being considered under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

The documents were requested by reference to details given in a document list which has been reported to the Ministry of Defence Police as having been stolen from the Gulf Veterans' Illnesses Medical Assessment Programme based at St. Thomas' Hospital, London. Since then the Ministry of Defence Police have been investigating the reported theft in the normal way.

The Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police is independent of ministerial and departmental influence in operational policing matters and it is for him to authorise any investigations.

Armed Forces (Married Quarters)

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the numbers of married quarters available to each service of the Armed Forces in Scotland by location; and how many are currently occupied by families. [62541]

Mr. Spellar: Housing for Service families is a tri-Service resource with no allotment of estates to individual Services.

Management information on housing is maintained by Defence Housing Executive Area, not by individual location, which could be obtained only at disproportionate cost. The information requested, broken down by the three Areas covering Scotland is:

All as at 31 October 1998	*Total stock*	*Number occupied*
Area 23		
Helensburgh and South West Scotland	1,637	1,057
Area 24		
Rosyth and South East Scotland	2,016	1,593
Area 25		
Highlands and Islands	2,425	1,945

Note:
The Total Stock figure includes houses held for, or undergoing major modernisation works and some awaiting disposal.

Gulf War Syndrome Victims

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he was informed, before they took place, about recent searches of the homes of Gulf War Syndrome victims by his Department's police. [63065]

Mr. Doug Henderson: No. The execution of search warrants is an operational matter for the Chief Constable of the MOD Police. The Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police is independent of Ministerial and Departmental influence in operational policing matters.

MOD Policies (Public Reaction)

Mr. Fabricant: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library the result of research carried out into public reaction to his Department's policies since 1 May 1997. [63144]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 30 June 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by my predecessor on 28 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *199*. I regret that the information provided contained minor inaccuracies and did not specify which reports would be placed in the Library. The research listed was that reported to the Survey Control Unit of the Office for National Statistics.

The RAF attitude survey and advertising tracking research was commissioned in March 1997 not March 1998 and should not therefore have been included in the previous answer. The Army fitness video research was commissioned but was not in fact, undertaken.

The following reports have now been placed in the Library of the House:

Public Presentation of the SDR: two reports on focus group research and an omnibus survey.

Attitudes to NATO

Catterick Garrison Radio Trade evaluation

Navy advertising evaluation

SGE & OM Qualitative research Royal Navy

OG8 dropout research Royal Navy

RAF Advertising Strategy

Technicians Target Market research—RAF

RAF degree package research

Image of RAF/reactions to advertising concepts

Advertising tracking RAF

Be the Best branding research—Army

Be the Best tracking research—Army.

The following reports are being withheld under the terms of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information:

Exemption 7 Effective management and operations of the public service

Evaluation of marketing effects on walk-ins to AFCO/IACIO offices

Events evaluation research

Exemption 13 Third party's commercial confidences

Territorial Army advertising development research

Army Campaign Development Research

Army Ethnic Minority Initiative evaluation

Exemption 11—Research, statistics and analysis

Army Presentation Team Evaluation

Officer Profiling research.

DEXSA 1998 Exhibition

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which *(a)* ministers and *(b)* officials visited the DEXSA 1998 exhibition in South Africa. [62081]

Mr. George Robertson: No British Ministers attended DEXSA 1998. Thirty-five UK based MOD staff attended: of these ten were British Army personnel demonstrating British equipment to prospective buyers and six were members of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency (DERA) who supervised the DERA stand. A further 13 locally based staff also attended.

SOCIAL SECURITY

State Earnings-related Pension Scheme

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what weekly SERPS pension would be received in April 2000 by *(a)* a man, on retirement, who had earned average male earnings throughout his working life, *(b)* the widow of such a man who died after 31 March 2000 and *(c)* a married woman, on retirement, who had earned average female earnings throughout her working life, except for 10 years during which she received child benefit, under the SERPS rules which existed (i) when SERPS was first introduced, (ii) following the enactment of legislation basing pensions entitlement on life time earnings and related changes and (iii) following the Pensions Act 1995. [61439]

Mr. Denham: *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* The information is in the table.

Additional pension award at April 2000 (2000–01) financial year

£

	1975 Act	*1986 Act*	*1995 Act*
Males	101.85	101.25	97.35
Widow	101.85	50.15	48.70
Female—full record	64.20	63.05	60.15
Female—10 years blank	39.40	35.10	34.50

Notes:

1. Figures are in April 2000 prices and are rounded to the nearest 5 pence.
2. The estimates assume constant average earnings for men and women.
3. 1975 Act figures include the best 20 years and the full 25 per cent accrual rate.
4. 1986 Act figures allow for lifetime earnings and 24.5 per cent. accruals post 1988. The introduction of Home Responsibilities Protection for SERPS from 1999 has not been included in the answer.
5. 1995 Act figures allow for annualization.
6. The estimates for females assume that the blank years are from 1978/79–1987/88.

Source:

The Government Actuary's Department.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the number of people who will be affected in each of the 20 years after 2000 by the decision to halve SERPS for widowers and widows whose spouse dies on or after 6 April 2000. [61149]

Angela Eagle *[Holding answer 27 November 1998]:* The information is in the table.

Information on the average number of widows and widowers who could be affected at any one time in each year

Year	*Number of widows and widowers affected*
2000–01	105,000
2001–02	310,000
2002–03	500,000
2003–04	675,000
2004–05	845,000
2005–06	1,000,000
2006–07	1,145,000

Information on the average number of widows and widowers who could be affected at any one time in each year

Year	Number of widows and widowers affected
2007–08	1,280,000
2008–09	1,410,000
2009–10	1,530,000
2010–11	1,640,000
2011–12	1,745,000
2012–13	1,845,000
2013–14	1,940,000
2014–15	2,025,000
2015–16	2,110,000
2016–17	2,190,000
2017–18	2,265,000
2018–19	2,335,000
2019–20	2,405,000
2020–21	2,470,000

Notes:

1. It should be noted that some of these people may have no SERPS entitlement and will not be affected by the change.
2. The proposed new schemes for widows and widowers under State Pension age have not been taken into account.
3. Cases where the widower is over state pension age but the deceased partner is under State Pension age are included in the estimates.
4. Figures are for GB only.
5. Numbers are rounded to the nearest 5,000.

Source:

Government Actuary's Department.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62833]

Mr. Denham: This Department employs Andrew Maugham as economic adviser to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, across the full range of Departmental issues. All special advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements.

War Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the take-up rate of war pensions. [62873]

Mr. Timms: It is not possible to estimate take-up of War Pensions. Only a minority of former members of the HM forces suffer any disablement due to service.

We estimate that 16 per cent. of service personnel discharged from the HM forces since 1945 have claimed a War Disablement Pension.

Work Incentives and Benefits

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when he expects to publish the results of his research on *(a)* work incentives and intermediaries, *(b)* attitudes towards housing benefits and *(c)* take-up of income support among older citizens; and if he will, in each case, place a copy of such results in the Library. [62872]

Angela Eagle: The research on work incentives and intermediaries was published on 15 September 1998, as the Department's Research Report Number 85—Elam G, Diffley M, and Shaw A, (1998) "Getting the Message Across", CDS. A copy was placed in the Library.

The Department will publish a research report on "Attitudes to the Welfare State and Responses to Reform" in the first quarter of 1999. This report will include a chapter on the research into attitudes towards Housing Benefits.

Research to understand why pensioners do not claim the Income Support to which they are entitled began at the end of last year. The fieldwork is now complete and a report is being prepared. Preliminary findings from qualitative research were published in June 1998 as the Department's Research Summary Number 6 "Older People and Income Support: Barriers and Triggers to the take-up of Income Support". A copy was placed in the Library. Full results are due early next year, and publication is expected in Spring.

Family Credit

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to separate bursaries from income when assessing an applicant's entitlement to family credit; and if he will make a statement. [62413]

Angela Eagle: There are no plans to separate bursaries from income when assessing an applicant's entitlement to Family Credit.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security under what statutory authority he can amend *(a)* the taper, *(b)* the rates of credit and *(c)* the structure of the child care subsidy within the family credit system. [62953]

Angela Eagle: The statutory authorities are:

(a) Regulation 48 of the Family Credit General Regulations 1987;

(b) Schedule 4 to the Family Credit General Regulations 1987; and

(c) Regulations 13 and 13A of the Family Credit General Regulations 1987.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what was the total sum paid to local authorities in Wales for the last complete financial year to enable them to discharge their obligation to pay council tax benefit to eligible claimants. [62503]

Angela Eagle: The total sum payable by this Department to local authorities in Wales for 1996–97 to enable them to discharge their obligations to pay Council Tax Benefit was £86.2 million.

Note:

The figure for 1996–97 is the last financial year available.

Source:

Audited Subsidy Claims.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Employment Service

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the reasons for the Employment Service's failure *(a)* to meet its target for placing unemployed people into work and *(b)* to stay within its planned unit cost of placing unemployed people into work in 1997–98. [61074]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 30 November 1998]:* The main reason for the shortfall was the introduction by ES—after the unemployed placing target was set—of a new, more rigorous, recording and validation system for job placings. Whilst improving the accuracy of performance information, this action reduced the number of job placings recorded. The welcome fall in unemployment during 1997–98 also meant there were fewer long term unemployed people for ES to help into work. The unemployed job placing target for 1998–99 has been set to take account of the new placing validation system, and the lower level of unemployment.

The 1997–98 planned unit cost of an unemployed placing was based on the assumption that the ES would achieve its placing target with the resources available. Due to the shortfall in unemployed job placings, the ES was unable to stay within its planned unit cost.

ES performance during 1997–98 should be seen in context of the excellent work it undertook to ensure the successful implementation of the New Deal programmes and other Welfare to Work initiatives.

Class Sizes

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if, where admission limits to infant schools are in excess of multiples of 30, his Department will insist on reduction or increases to admission numbers when agreeing local education authority development plans. [61823]

Ms Estelle Morris: No. It is a matter for local decision how local education authorities and school governing bodies comply with the duty to limit infant classes to 30 or under with effect from the start of the 2001–02 school year. Adjusting published school admission numbers relating to infant classes to multiples of 30 is one of a number of options available, although admission authorities have a duty to vary standard numbers where these are incompatible with class size limits. The Department will consider the plans put forward by local education authorities in the light of local needs and circumstances.

Local authority plans must give due regard to the exercise of parental preference. Our guidance states that this can be best achieved by adding to the number of classes in popular and high achieving schools which are able to expand. Where this is not possible local education authorities should ensure that there is sufficient space at another local school which offers a broadly equivalent standard of education.

Teachers (Resignations)

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the total number of qualified teachers who left teaching in each of the years 1992–93 to 1997–98 for reasons other than reaching the normal retirement age; and if he will provide an analysis of the reasons. [61819]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows full and part-time qualified teachers (excluding short term supply teachers) who left teaching in the maintained nursery, primary, secondary and special schools sector in England and Wales, during the financial years shown, by their position at the end of the year.

Changes, made in April and September 1997, to the early retirement arrangements for teachers are now bringing down the numbers of premature and ill-health retirements.

	1992–93	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*[1]1996–97*
Dead or barred	400	400	400	400	400
Ill-health retirement	3,900	4,500	5,100	5,000	5,200
Premature retirement (redundancy)	2,300	3,000	2,400	3,200	3,100
Premature retirement (efficiency)[2]	5,400	5,400	5,400	5,900	7,900
Not in service—men[3,4]	3,400	3,100	3,400	2,900	3,100
Not in service—women[3,4]	14,100	12,300	13,600	11,100	11,000
Total leaving teaching service	29,500	28,700	30,300	28,500	30,700
Going to other teaching service[5]	4,000	10,300	4,500	5,000	4,400

[1] 1996–97 figures are provisional

[2] The increase in premature retirements on efficiency grounds in 1996–97 was mainly caused by teachers leaving before the changes to the early retirement arrangements in September 1997.

[3] Some of the teachers shown as not in service may be in service that is not recorded i.e. in independent schools that are not part of the Teachers Pension Scheme (TPS).

[4] A number of the teachers shown as not in service will have taken career breaks and will return to teaching.

[5] Going to other service such as short term supply teaching, independent schools (that are part of the TPS) or the further education sector. Only the 1992–93 figures include teachers leaving sixth form colleges. In 1993–94, sixth form colleges left the schools sector, this has distorted the number of teachers apparently leaving the schools sector and moving to another sector in 1993–94. From 1994–95 onwards, teachers leaving sixth form colleges are excluded.

Note:
All figures rounded to the nearest hundred

Undergraduates

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of undergraduates of British nationality entering *(a)* Oxford, *(b)* Cambridge and *(c)* the London School of Economics came from (i) fee-paying private schools and (ii) selective grammar schools in each year since 1968. [62027]

Mr. Mudie: The available information for the years 1994 to 1997 is shown in Table 1. The data are taken

from information collected by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS). Prior to 1994, the data were collected by the Universities Central Council for Admissions (UCCA) but were not published separately for each university.

Data for Oxford and Cambridge for the years prior to 1994 are however published by the admissions offices of these universities and available data are shown in Table 2, though this does not separately identify grammar schools.

Table 1: Accepted home domiciled applicants to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses, 1994 to 1997

Year of entry	All accepted applicants	of which, percentage whose previous school was: Maintained grammar	Independent
Cambridge			
1994	2,991	13	46
1995	2,989	14	45
1996	2,767	15	44
1997	3,001	13	45
Oxford			
1994	2,891	13	49
1995	2,848	12	50
1996	2,948	13	51
1997	2,942	13	51
LSE			
1994	503	9	33
1995	581	10	30
1996	500	11	32
1997	592	10	35

Table 2: Accepted applicants [1] to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses, 1970 to 1993

Year of entry	All accepted applicants	of which, percentage whose previous establishment was: Maintained school or college [2]	Independent school [3]
Cambridge			
1993	3,068	45	45
1992	3,052	46	44
1991	3,015	48	47
1990	3,117	44	44
1989	3,013	47	43
1988	2,933	43	45
1987	3,020	41	47
1986	3,129	39	50
1985	3,098	42	50
1984	2,985	43	49
1983	2,899	48	46
1982	2,792	47	48
1981	2,021	41	51
1980	2,322	46	49
1979	2,239	45	49
1978	2,386	49	48
1977	2,359	44	53
1976	2,455	44	53
1975	2,453	46	50
1974	2,878	42	50
1973	2,887	43	49
1972	2,907	40	52
1971	2,868	40	53
1970	2,715	40	57
Oxford			
1993	3,157	44	47
1992	3,184	43	49
1991	3,189	42	48

Table 2: Accepted applicants [1] to full-time and sandwich undergraduate courses, 1970 to 1993

Year of entry	All accepted applicants	of which, percentage whose previous establishment was: Maintained school or college [2]	Independent school [3]
1990	3,110	45	48
1989	3,164	46	46
1988	3,226	45	48
1987	3,070	46	46
1986	2,940	47	45
1985	3,120	43	54
1984	2,853	49	48
1983	2,686	50	47
1982	2,840	49	47
1981	2,836	50	47
1980	2,814	49	49
1979	2,788	47	50
1978	2,850	47	50
1977	2,817	48	50
1976	2,744	47	52
1975	2,719	45	52
1974	2,537	41	53
1973	2,500	42	53
1972	2,497	42	55
1971	2,382	41	55
1970	2,417	43	55

[1] Home and overseas students
[2] Including HE, FE and Scottish and N. Irish establishments
[3] Including Direct Grant establishments

Further and Higher Education

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to allow the use of local authority benefits data and Benefits Agency data to target Access resources for the recruitment of students to further education and higher education. [62545]

Mr. Mudie: This is a matter for those administering student support arrangements to agree locally, but I would not expect them to ask for such detailed information on individual students. Confirmation that a student or their parents are in receipt of an income-related benefit is usually all that is needed. The arrangements have operated in this way for a number of years.

Teacher Morale

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of teacher morale; and if he will make a statement. [62361]

Mr. Charles Clarke: My colleagues and I continually assess teacher morale through the various contacts we have with teachers, which include visits to schools, face to face meetings, correspondence and consultations. We have published, on 3 December, a Green Paper setting out our vision of a modernised profession capable of creating a world class education service.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many staff are employed in units of his Department established since May 1997; [63059]

(2) how many employees his Department had in May 1997; and how many it has currently. [63067]

Mr. Mudie: There are currently 204 DfEE staff employed in new Divisions established since May 1997. In May 1997, there were 4,230 staff in the DfEE. There are currently 4,245 staff.

Education Council (EC)

Mr. Stephen Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Council of EC Education Ministers held on 4 December. [63261]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The Council, at which my noble Friend the Minister for Education and Employment represented the UK, reached agreement on common position texts for European Parliament and Council decisions establishing the second phases of the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes. Agreement was also reached on a Council decision establishing the third phase of the Tempus programme.

The Council received information from the European Commission on implementation of the Commission's White Paper "Teaching and Learning: Towards the Learning Society" and on the Commission's Action Plan on the promotion of transnational mobility in the Community in the fields of education, training and youth. The Council also received information from the Austrian delegation on education events organised during the Austrian Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

WALES

Development Agencies

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many representatives of the Welsh and Scottish development agencies are stationed outside the United Kingdom. [62023]

Mr. Hain: The Welsh and Scottish Development Agencies have the following representatives stationed outside the UK:

	Welsh Development Agency
Europe	5
Asia Pacific	8
Japan	3
USA	7
Canada	1
Total	24

Scottish Enterprise

	Locate in Scotland	*Scottish Trade International*
USA	18	5
Asia	6	6
Europe	6	5
South America	—	2
South Africa	—	1
United Arab Emirates	—	1
Total	30	20

In addition, Highlands and Islands Enterprise have two representatives in Europe.

World Heritage Site Nominations

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list those organisations in Wales involved in reviewing World Heritage Site nominations resulting from the Government's recent consultation. [62050]

Mr. Hain: Welsh candidates for the UK Tentative List of potential World Heritage Sites were provisionally identified by the Ancient Monuments Board for Wales and the Historic Buildings Council for Wales (in consultation with Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments) and the Countryside Council for Wales. All local authorities in Wales as well as specialist bodies with an interest in the recommended sites, were subsequently consulted. Cadw has been involved in the review of the results of consultation co-ordinated by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

Semi-conductor, Newport

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much financial assistance has been provided to date by his Department and by Government bodies in Wales to LG Industries for the proposed semi-conductor investment at Newport, Gwent. [62223]

Mr. Hain: Out of the total support package offered to the overall LG development at Newport the payments to LG Semicon to date amount to £43.328 million. This represents the apportioned value of the land acquired for the development, the general infrastructure and site development costs attributable to LG Semicon, and the property development grant paid by the Welsh Development Agency. This total also include training grants of £528,487 paid by Gwent TEC.

None of the grant offered under the Regional Selective Assistance scheme has yet been paid.

Mr. Denzil Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what procedures his Department has in place to ensure that LG Industries repays any financial assistance received from his Department and from Governmental bodies in Wales for the proposed semi-conductor investment at Newport, Gwent, if the proposed investment does not go ahead. [62224]

Mr. Hain: The Welsh Development Agency has agreements in place with both LG Electronics Ltd. and LG Semicon Ltd. which provide for recovery of grant payments in appropriate circumstances. The Regional Selective Assistance offered to the Companies is also subject to detailed recovery provisions. Gwent TEC makes payments to the LG Companies only when individuals have been training and in employment for 3 months. The total of training support will not be paid if training does not take place for the agreed numbers of staff.

Millennium (Emergency Cover)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans his Department has to contract with the armed services to provide emergency cover over the millennium period; and what estimate he has made of the cost of that cover. [62570]

Mr. Michael: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to him by my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *20*.

Private Finance Initiative

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) what the value is of PFI credits approved for each unitary authority in Wales; [62366]

(2) what is the total value of *(a)* all PFI applications per unitary authority in Wales to date and *(b)* PFI schemes approved per unitary authority to date. [62370]

Mr. Michael: No PFI credits have yet been issued to County and County Borough Councils in Wales. However, on reaching contract signing stage credits amounting to about £150 million are available for the projects selected as Local Government pathfinders.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the average time taken for the appraisal of PFI schemes in Wales. [62368]

Mr. Michael: Each scheme has to be appraised against the criteria of affordability and value for money. The time taken for the appraisal of PFI varies from scheme to scheme to such a degree that it is not possible to provide a meaningful average figure.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the notional value is of Government credits for PFI apportioned to Wales. [62367]

Mr. Michael: There are no PFI credits apportioned to Wales. The Welsh Block receives a consequential of the revenue costs of local government PFI projects approved in England. I determine the related level of PFI credits to be made available in Wales as and when successful projects emerge.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the criteria applied in considering PFI schemes for approval in Wales. [62372]

Mr. Michael: The criteria applied in considering PFI schemes are that each scheme should:

meet a policy objective of the Welsh Office;

meet the priorities of the Welsh Office;

deliver good value for money by allowing both public and private sectors to focus on what they do best; and

ensure that staff are fairly treated whoever employs them.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many PFI schemes are currently under review in Wales. [62369]

Mr. Michael: There are 6 PFI projects included in the Local Government pathfinder programme. There are 3 major NHS PFI projects currently being progressed with the private sector and in addition there are a number of other PFI schemes being progressed individually by NHS Trusts within locally delegated arrangements. There is also a PFI project with one of our NDPBs (Bute Avenue) and the Department itself has one project (the A55).

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many PFI schemes have been approved for each unitary authority in Wales. [62371]

Mr. Michael: The Department is supporting 6 pathfinder PFI projects in the local government sector and will approve projects which successfully meet all the relevant criteria, including affordability. To date, no proposals have reached this stage.

Welsh Language

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what steps he has taken to ensure that the Welsh Language Board monitors Welsh language schemes effectively. [62364]

Mr. Michael: The Welsh Language Board has to set out plans for its activities in its corporate and operational plans. These plans require the approval of Ministers. Under the current approved operational plan, the Board is requiring bodies operating Welsh language schemes to submit annual reports on how they have carried out those schemes. The Board also uses its powers to investigate matters relating to individual schemes where it receives a complaint, or where it has other reason to believe that there has been a failure to carry out a scheme.

The Board's work and progress against its approved plans, is monitored in a cycle of regular meetings with Ministers and officials.

Health Authorities (Public Consultation)

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much was spent by each health authority in Wales on public consultation documents on their services in the last year for which figures are available. [62505]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The information requested is not held centrally.

A5-A55 Dual Carriageway

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales which company has been awarded the contract to build the A5/A55 dual carriageway across Anglesey; and if he will give the starting date for the work. [62504]

Mr. Hain: The contract has not yet been awarded but negotiations with the Preferred Bidder are nearing conclusion. The starting date for the work will be the date the contract is signed which I will announce when known.

HEALTH

Clinical Perfusionists

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received regarding the regulation of clinical perfusionists; and if he will make a statement. [62360]

Mr. Milburn: We are considering a representation from The Society of Perfusionists of Great Britain and Ireland to regulate clinical perfusionists under the Professions Supplementary to Medicine Act 1960.

Adoption Act 1976

Mr. Bob Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to amend section 51 of the Adoption Act 1976. [62638]

Mr. Hutton: We have no present plans to amend section 51 of the Adoption Act 1976. However, officials are working with the main interested groups to establish what might be done under existing legislation to clarify procedures relating to the disclosure of birth records.

Correspondence

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place a copy of his letter to Anthony C. Walkey, 11 Castle Street, Totnes, Devon, referred to in his answer of 2 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *423*, in the Library; and if he will make a statement on the steps he is proposing to take to ensure that lessons are learnt from the case of Mr. Walkey's son. [62307]

Mr. Dobson *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* If Mr. Walkey gives his permission I shall place copies of my letter to him in the Library. Officials have written seeking his permission.

Mr. Kaufman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the right hon. Member for Manchester, Gorton may expect replies to his letters to Ministers in his Department dated 20 August, 29 September and 29 October with regard to Mr. Peter Welbourne of 51 Mackenzie Street. [63058]

Mr. Hutton: I have replied to my right hon. Friend today.

Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the latest figures for people waiting *(a)* 13 to 25 weeks and *(b)* 26 weeks or more to see a consultant in the Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust area. [62646]

Mr. Milburn: The number of patients who were waiting for a first outpatient appointment at Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust at the end of September were:

13–25 weeks: 1,596

Over 26 weeks: 341.

Mr. Burns: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the latest figures for people waiting 12 months or more for hospital treatment in the Mid Essex Hospital Services NHS Trust area. [62645]

Mr. Milburn: The number of patients waiting over 12 months at the Mid Essex Hospital Services National Health Service Trust at the end of October was 1,180.

Midwives

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which NHS trusts in England *(a)* have and *(b)* have not implemented the Government's recommendation to ensure that midwives working as the lead professional are awarded the minimum F-grade salary. [62951]

Mr. Milburn: In July 1995, following the publication of the Changing Childbirth report in 1993, the National Health Service Executive issued Executive Letter (95)77 to trusts, suggesting that an 'F' or 'G' grade would normally be appropriate for posts in which a midwife has a defined caseload of women to whom she/he gives the full range of midwifery care. Many NHS trusts have reviewed midwifery services and grading since Changing Childbirth. In January 1998 the Nursing Pay Review Body recommended that the Health Departments ensure the implementation of EL(95)77 at trust level and Advance Letter (Nurses/Midwives) 1/98 was issued on 4 June 1998 asked employing authorities to act upon this recommendation. Subsequently the NHS Executive wrote to NHS trusts in June 1998 asking about midwives' grading with reference to EL(95)77. We have summarised responses in supplementary evidence to the Nursing Pay Review Body, copies of which are available in the Library.

MRSA

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the risks presented to *(a)* doctors, *(b)* nurses, *(c)* other hospital staff and *(d)* visitors by MRSA. [62863]

Ms Jowell: Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus does not pose a significant risk to healthy people and we are not aware of any evidence to suggest that MRSA infection is more common in hospital staff or visitors than in the rest of the general population. Employers must make a local assessment of the risks from MRSA and other biological agents under the Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations 1994.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many legal cases there have been against hospitals in each of the last 10 years, as a result of patients becoming infected by MRSA. [62869]

Ms Jowell: The information requested is not collected centrally.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of future therapeutic problems likely to occur as a result of MRSA, GRAM-negative bacilli and enterococci becoming resistant to available antibiotics. [62865]

Ms Jowell: Antibiotic resistance is one of the major challenges facing the international public health community. It was the subject of a comprehensive and wide ranging report earlier this year from the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology to which we will be responding shortly.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of the MRSA in each of the last three years. [62868]

Ms Jowell: These data are not held centrally. In any individual patient, it is usually very difficult to assess the contribution of any infection acquired in hospital on the outcome, since many patients are already seriously ill from other conditions.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to develop community-based approaches to the prevention and transmission of MRSA. [62862]

Ms Jowell: The Department has issued guidelines on the control of infection in nursing and residential homes and in September 1998 issued a report by the Standing Medical Advisory Committee on good practice in clinical prescribing of antimicrobials to minimise the emergence of antibiotic resistance. Our response to the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology Report on Resistance on Antibiotics, which will be published shortly, will include information about other initiatives.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to make MRSA a notifiable disease. [62866]

Ms Jowell: Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus infection can take the form of many different diseases ranging from minor skin infections to pneumonia or septicaemia, all of which are more commonly due to other causes. It cannot be diagnosed clinically but only by laboratory tests. Notification of clinically suspected cases of all of these diseases would be wholly impracticable. However, consideration is being given to the introduction, at the earliest possible opportunity, of a statutory requirement on laboratories to notify certain specified test results, which may include those indicating MRSA infection.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what steps he has taken to ensure that hospitals' computers are millennium compliant; how much money has been allocated to this; what percentage of this has been given to Taskforce 2000; and if he will make a statement. [62411]

Mr. Milburn: All National Health Service trusts are required to report quarterly, in detail, on their plans for dealing with the Year 2000 problem. This information is published on the Internet, and is reported to Parliament as part of my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's regular reports on progress in the public sector. The NHS Executive's regional offices, as part of their performance management responsibilities, analyse the returned questionnaires and follow up progress and issues through visits and other surveys. The purpose of these arrangements is not only to assess progress but to identify central support requirements to help ensure a successful outcome for all NHS organisations.

The latest returns for the period to 30 September 1998 show the reported position of the number of NHS organisations making satisfactory or good progress towards Year 2000 compliance currently standing at 93 per cent.

The NHS's estimate of the cost of dealing with the Year 2000 problem is £318 million. This figure includes the cost of replacing of deficient equipment.

The Department has not contributed any funding to Taskforce 2000.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Forestry

Mr. Paice: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to receive the report on a Forestry Strategy for England from the Forestry Commission; and when he will publish it. [62678]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* I have received the report from the Forestry Commission and expect to publish the Strategy later this week.

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he plans to publish the Government's Forestry Strategy for England. [63226]

Mr. Morley: We have today published "A New Focus for England's Woodlands", our forestry strategy for England, and a copy has been placed in the Library.

The Strategy sets out our priorities and programmes for the creation and management of woods and forests in England. It will help to focus discussion on how we, in partnership with other organisations, can work to ensure that England's woods and forests continue to provide benefits for England's people.

The Strategy sets out a series of actions to help achieve our priorities and to help implement our key programmes. The Strategy is not prescriptive. It sets out the framework for the Government's continued support for forestry in England and will guide the targeting of our resources in the years ahead.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies, and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62849]

Mr. Morley: There are currently no secondees from private companies in this department.

Organic Production

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the financial incentives which presently exist to encourage tenant farmers to switch to organic production. [62425]

Mr. Morley: A comprehensive review of the rates and the structure of aid to farmers for conversion to organic production methods was produced in April 1998. A copy was placed in the Library of the House. The review included a detailed analysis of the cost of conversion of different farm types. Tenant farmers were not identified as a group requiring separate treatment within this analysis. As a result of the review a substantial increase in the payment rates and other measures designed to improve support for the organic sector was announced on 30 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *466–67*.

CABINET OFFICE

Correspondence

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what guidelines the Government have set in respect of the timescale for Ministers to *(a)* acknowledge and *(b)* reply to letters from hon. Members regarding (i) constituency business and (ii) other matters. [63116]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Cabinet Office issued guidance in October to departments reminding them of the procedures to be followed when handling correspondence from hon. Members. The guidance, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of the House, emphasises the importance of setting robust and challenging targets for responding to letters from hon. Members.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 9 December 1998

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

BBC Funding

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects to announce who will chair the independent review panel considering BBC funding. [62949]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* I expect to announce the chairman and members of the licence fee review panel shortly.

Tourism

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he intends to take to encourage visitors to the UK to visit parts of the country outside London. [62961]

Janet Anderson: The British Tourist Authority recently opened the new Britain Visitor Centre in London. The new Centre, which is a partnership between the BTA and the tourist boards of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, aims to encourage visitors to London to travel more widely throughout the UK. This year we are providing a further £1.5 million to the London Tourist Board to support its Focus London campaign, which promotes London as a gateway to the rest of Britain. Our new tourism strategy, which will be published early next year, will set out in detail our plans for spreading the benefits of tourism throughout the country and throughout society.

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to copyright the name of the UK Sports Institute. [62700]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* I assume that the hon. Member has in mind registration of a trademark rather than copyright. Action is in hand through the United Kingdom Sports Council to register as a trademark the names 'UK Sports Institute', 'United Kingdom Sports Institute' and 'UKSI' with the Trademarks Registry. A hearing before the Trademarks Examiner was attended by the UK Sports Council's legal advisers on 24 November as a forerunner to the process of formalising the submission of evidence for registration in the form of a Statutory Declaration.

A licence agreement has also been prepared between the Department, the UK Sports Council and Phoenix Sports Ltd. (the Sheffield bid team) for use of the trademark 'UK Sports Institute' and other similar marks during the period prior to registration of the trademark.

Creative Industries

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many representatives there are on the Creative Industries Task Group and Film Policy Review who have a background in the technical side of their industry. [61425]

Janet Anderson: Industry members of the Creative Industries Task Force were invited to participate on the basis of their expertise and experience and do not represent particular industries or aspects of industry. However, Paul Smith has a technical background in fashion.

Members of the Film Policy Review Action Committee were chosen for their knowledge and experience of the film industry as a whole. Several have direct experience of technical aspects of the industry.

DEFENCE

Navy (Early Retirement)

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the numbers of *(a)* divorces and *(b)* applications for premature voluntary retirement of Royal Naval personnel were during each of the last 10 years. [62936]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My Department does not hold statistics on divorces of service personnel.

The number of applications for premature voluntary release (PVR) by members of the Royal Naval Service from 1988–89 to 1997–98 were:

Financial year	*Applications*
1988–89	3,788
1989–90	4,647
1990–91	3,470
1991–92	2,140
1992–93	1,667
1993–94	1,396
1994–95	1,691
1995–96	2,639
1996–97	2,086
1997–98	2,019

Notes:
1. Royal Naval Service includes Royal Marines and Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service.
2. PVR applications are recorded against the date they were input to the computer database.

Otterburn Range

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if munitions containing depleted uranium are authorised to be fired on the Otterburn range, Northumberland. [63034]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Munitions containing depleted uranium have not been and are not fired on the ranges at Otterburn.

Helicopter Crash (South China Sea)

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assistance was offered by *(a)* Singapore rescue helicopters and *(b)* the Malaysian Government, following

the crash of a British military helicopter in the South China Sea off the east coast of Malaysia; and if he will make a statement. [62079]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* A Lynx helicopter, operating from HMS Grafton, crashed during a bilateral exercise with the Singapore Navy on 23 September this year. Following the crash, a Singaporean naval vessel rescued the pilot after he had spent about an hour in the sea. Other Singaporean ships and aircraft continued to search for the second crew member until the decision was taken to call off the rescue.

Malaysia was not involved in the exercise and was therefore not in a position to offer immediate help. Two Malaysian ships did, however, offer assistance later; but by then the wreck of the helicopter had been located and so it was not necessary to accept the offer.

Gulf War Veterans

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to publish the interim epidemiological reports relating to Gulf War Syndrome sufferers. [62956]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The MOD is funding two epidemiological studies into the health of UK Gulf veterans. One study, being conducted by a team from Manchester University led by Professor Nicola Cherry, aims to determine whether Gulf veterans are experiencing greater ill-health than Service personnel who did not take part in the conflict and to identify possible exposures and predisposing factors associated with any distinctive pattern of symptoms which may be found. It will also investigate whether there is an increased incidence of mortality or cancer amongst Gulf veterans. Initial results from this study are expected to emerge in the first part of next year.

The other study, being conducted by a team from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine led by Dr. Patricia Doyle, will examine the reproductive health of Gulf veterans and the health of their children. Initial results from this study are not expected until the end of 1999.

Initial results from a US-funded study by a team from Kings College, London, led by Professors Simon Wessely and Anthony David, are expected to become available at around the turn of the year.

All three research teams are working on an independent basis and therefore the publication of their results is a matter for them and not for my Department.

NATO

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the allegation that secrets of where NATO were prepared to strike during the recent crisis in Kosovo were passed to the Serbs; and what assessment he has made of the implications for UK forces. [62096]

Mr. Doug Henderson: There have been recent reports of a possible breach of security involving Major Bunel, a French military officer working at NATO headquarters. This and any other alleged breaches of NATO or national security regulations are matters for the security authorities concerned. In the Bunel case, the French Minister of Defence has stated publicly that Major Bunel had not had access to detailed planning, and preparations for NATO military action had therefore not been compromised. This case had no direct implications for UK forces.

Oman

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the reports alleging corruption in the 1970s involving members of Her Majesty's Forces in Oman; and if he will make a statement. [62296]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I believe that my hon. Friend is referring to allegations that appeared in a newspaper article and a book recently of corruption in the Special Air Services (SAS) Regiment during the Dhofar Campaign in the early 1970s. The events in question took place almost 25 years ago and official records on the matter are incomplete. However, I understand that the Regiment dealt with the matter at the time and that disciplinary action, where appropriate, was taken.

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is his e-mail address. [62565]

Mr. Doug Henderson: An e-mail address at which Ministers in this Department may be contacted will be set up shortly.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Local Government Finance

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will list the percentage changes in *(a)* standard spending assessments and *(b)* revenue support grants for (i) shire counties and (ii) shire districts between the settlement for 1998–99 and the proposals for 1999–2000, ranked and numbered in descending order; [63074]

(2) if he will list for 1999–2000 the proposed *(a)* revenue support grants and *(b)* standard spending assessments for (i) district councils and (ii) shire counties as a sum per head of their populations, ranked and numbered in descending order. [63073]

Ms Armstrong: The information requested has been placed in the library.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the real terms percentage difference is between the SSAs for North Somerset Council for 1998–99 and 1999–2000. [63069]

Ms Armstrong: The real terms percentage difference between the SSAs for North Somerset Council for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 is 1.6 per cent. i.e. 4.1 per cent. deflated by the GDP deflator.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what amount, per capita, is allotted in external support grants for 1998–99 and 1999–2000 *(a)* as a national average and *(b)* for North Somerset Council. [63071]

Ms Armstrong: The two main external support grants covering services provided by unitary authorities are redistributed national non-domestic rates (NNDR) and revenue support grant (RSG). The table shows the per capita amounts for 1998–99 for England and for North Somerset, and the provisional amounts for 1999–2000.

£

	1998–99		Provisional 1999–2000	
	England	North Somerset	England	North Somerset
NNDR	225/hd	236/hd	276/hd	255/hd
RSG	397/hd	240/hd	403/hd	234/hd
Total	652/hd	475/hd	680/hd	489/hd

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the real terms difference between the education spending in 1998–99 by North Somerset Council and the Education SSA for the same authority in 1999–2000 is, expressed as *(a)* cash and *(b)* a percentage. [63070]

Ms Armstrong: The 1999–2000 Education SSA (Expressed at 1998–99 prices) for North Somerset Council was £4.957 million (7.0 per cent.) less than the 1998–99 budgeted Net Revenue Expenditure. The Net Revenue Expenditure was £6.705 million (10.4 per cent.) more than the 1998–99 SSA. The actual SSAs and NRE used are shown.

1998–99 SSA for Education: £64.601m

1998–99 NRE[1] for Education: £71.306m

1999–2000 SSA for Education (adjusted using the GDP deflator to 1998–99 prices): £66.349m.

[1] Includes an apportionment of Capital Expenditure charged to Revenue Account but excludes specific and special grants.

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what the 1999–2000 SSA for North Somerset Council would be if the real terms percentage increase were the same as the national average. [63068]

Ms Armstrong: Applying the national average real terms percentage increase to the 1998–99 SSA for North Somerset would give £133.853 million.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each local authority, the 1999–2000 standard spending assessment *(a)* per five to 10 year old pupil and *(b)* per 11 to 15 year old pupil. [62887]

Ms Armstrong *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* A table showing the Primary Education SSA per pupil aged 5 to 10 and the Secondary Education SSA per pupil aged 11 to 15 for each local education authority has been placed in the library.

Driving Instructors

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he takes to ensure that those qualifying as driving instructors will be equipped in most cases to meet the standards later operating in their check-tests; and if he will introduce an appeals system for those who fail their check-tests. [63072]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The standards established when passing the qualifying examinations are the same as those needed subsequently to pass the periodic check-tests. Advice and assistance is available to instructors at any time from local supervising examiners. Also, the system of check-tests is operated in an educational rather than a punitive way. Following an unsatisfactory check-test, an examiner will offer to discuss performance, so the instructor can consider what action is needed, possibly involving re-training, before a further check-test takes place. We have no plans currently to introduce an appeals system to review the examiner's judgment where a check-test is failed. It would be difficult for an independent adjudicator to pass judgment on a text without having been present.

The Registrar seeks to remove the instructor's certificate only after a third consecutive unsatisfactory performance. A statutory mechanism already does exist to protect any instructor who wishes to appeal against the Registrar's decision to take removal action.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many driving instructors who have been removed from registration during the last four years following check-test failures have then sought re-qualification by taking the appropriate examinations; how many of these have been successful; and if he will make a statement. [63075]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In the last four years, 254 instructors have been removed from the Register of Approved Driving Instructors following check-test failure. But information about how many have subsequently sought re-qualification, and how many have been successful, is not held in a retrievable form.

Family Dwellings

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if the Government will appoint a commission to re-examine standards for, and design of, family dwellings. [62283]

Mr. Raynsford: I have no plans to do so. The Building Regulations set minimum standards for the health and safety of people in and around dwellings, as well as making requirements for energy efficiency and access for disabled people. Housing warranty providers also set their own standards over and above the requirements of the Building Regulations.

In addition, my Department has commissioned a set of detailed Housing Quality Indicators, which can be used to evaluate all aspects of housing design, from internal and external layout and space standards to energy efficiency and sustainable construction. The Indicators will be published early in the New Year, and the Housing Corporation has recommended their use by all Registered Social Landlords.

Motorway Service Areas

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the criteria used by the Highways Agency to determine the basis of need for a new motorway service area to be built. [62902]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Decisions on the need for new motorway service areas (MSAs) are not matters for the Highways Agency. Its role is to advise on the impact of MSA proposals on the operation and safety of the motorway and trunk road network. Need is a matter for planning authorities to consider in the light of that and other relative advice. Guidance on the criteria to be used in determining need issues was contained in my answer of 31 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *611–12*. Copies are in the House Libraries.

Nuclear Fuel Transport (Irish Sea)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* what representations he has received concerning the 24 October 1998 incident involving the 'Pacific Crane' vessel in the Irish Sea, *(b)* what assessment he has made of the environmental issues raised and *(c)* what (i) correspondence and (ii) meetings have taken place with British Nuclear Fuels Ltd. since the incident; and if he will make a statement. [61969]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *47*.

Waste Strategy

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he is taking on the responses to the consultation paper on the new waste strategy for England and Wales "Less Waste: more value". [63604]

Mr. Meacher: My Department is examining all the comments that were made, both by individuals and by organisations in response to "Less waste: more value". Where further elucidation seems necessary, they are discussing points with a number of experts selected on a personal basis, as well as continuing to hold regular liaison and ad hoc meetings with representative bodies from local government, the community sector and industry. The aim of this consultation is to produce a draft waste strategy next spring for further consultation with a view to adopting a final strategy before the end of 1999.

Fuel Duty Rebates

Mr. Stinchcombe: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the advantages of introducing necessary user rebates in respect of fuel duties paid by the disabled and their carers. [61796]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government have no plans to introduce a fuel duty rebate for disabled motorists but they will continue to take account of the impact of the fuel duty escalator on these and other essential car users. Whilst disabled motorists often need the use of a car, they can still reduce their fuel consumption and, in some cases, will be able to choose significantly more fuel-efficient vehicles which manufacturers are committed to introducing to the market. Disability Living Allowance, which will rise in line with inflation, also provides a contribution towards the extra costs of disability, and is awarded on the basis of the mobility as well as care needs of disabled people. In addition, vehicles owned by many disabled drivers are exempt from Vehicle Excise Duty.

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his e-mail address. [62556]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister, and all other Ministers in this Department, can currently be contacted via the Department's Web site—WWW.DETR.GOV.UK. All members of the Department, including my right hon. Friend, will have individual e-mail addresses from March next year.

Non-metallic Storage Vessels

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the Health and Safety Executive's findings over the past 10 years on the failures of non-metallic storage vessels including plastic-lined GRP storage vessels, together with relevant information on recorded failures which is contained in the HSE database of investigated incidents; and if he will make a statement. [62303]

Mr. Meacher *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* A research report by the Health and Safety Laboratory of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has reviewed all the failures of non-metallic vessels reported to HSE during the period 1986–1996. The report discloses that early experience with GRP storage vessels was disappointing due to poor design, poor or inadequate installation, lack of suitable testing and inspection techniques, poor fabrication or materials specification, environmental stress cracking, and user-abuse. A number of key recommendations aimed at addressing these problems are contained in the report and HSE is reviewing its guidance in the light of these. In total, the report reviews a total of 59 incidents, 7 of which involved plastic-lined GRP storage vessels. Arrangements are in hand for a copy of the report to be placed in the Commons Library.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how and when he will consult rural communities and their representative bodies in accordance with section 2(3) of the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998 before appointing members to the RDA boards. [63092]

Mr. Caborn: The Government started the appointments process while the legislation was before Parliament, in order to be in a position to take decision on appointments to the RDA boards soon after the commencement of the Regional Development Agencies Act 1998.

Earlier this year we advertised in the national press for applications direct from individuals and also consulted a wide range of bodies asking them to nominate people whom they thought were suitable for board membership. These groups included many who represent the interests of rural communities.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62841]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The following Special Advisers are employed in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions:

Joe Irvin full-time special adviser. He advises on all areas for which the DPM is responsible.

Joan Hammell full-time special adviser. She also assists the DPM.

Paul Hackett, part-time special adviser. Advises on regional issues.

Darren Murphy part-time special adviser. Advises on local government and housing.

Richard Olszewski. Special adviser on transport issues.

Special Advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements. It is not appropriate to give details about particular individual's level of security clearance.

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62831]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are currently 11 people on secondment to the Department from private companies. They are listed:

Name	*Company*	*Current responsibilities*
A. Carter	Boots the Chemist Ltd.	Contributing to planning and regeneration issues, including work on sustainable communities, the New Deal for Communities, and the revision of planning guidance
M. Coe	Unilever	Advising on promoting greater environmental awareness by business
B. Everett	Bellway Urban Renewal	Secretariat of the Urban Task Force
J. Faragher	CRE Group Ltd.	Expert adviser in the European Commission on environmental management systems and the development of the ecomanagement and audit scheme
C. Fulford	KPMG	Secretariat of the Urban Task Force
J. Hall	Institute for Fiscal Studies	Providing advice on industrial, regional and labour market issues
M. Salter	OPM	Secretariat of the Urban Task Force
G. Pearce	Bank of Scotland	Assisting with the restructuring arrangements for Channel Tunnel Rail Link
A. Stacey	ABROS	Secretariat of the Urban Task Force
S. Tindale	IPPR	Attached to the Sustainable Development Unit providing advice on environmental issues
A. Wain	Kvaerner Construction	Implementation of the recommendations of Sir John Egan's Construction Task Force Report "Rethinking Construction"

Railtrack

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the transparency of the information provided by Railtrack regarding levels of capital investment and spending on maintenance; and if he will make a statement. [62601]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under Condition 7 of its Network Licence, Railtrack is required to publish an annual Network Management Statement (NMS), setting out its plans for the maintenance, renewal and development of the rail network for a ten year period, with greater detail for the first three years of the programme. The form of the NMS, and the period it covers, has to be approved by the Rail Regulator.

Asbestos

Mr. Worthington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what evidence he has obtained that contractors from other countries dump asbestos waste in Britain. [62636]

Mr. Meacher: The import of asbestos waste into Great Britain is controlled by the Asbestos (Prohibitions) Regulations 1992. Under these Regulations, the import of amphibole (largely brown or blue) asbestos waste is prohibited. Proposals from the Health and Safety Commission, currently under consultation, will extend this prohibition to include the import of chrysotile (white) asbestos waste.

While derogations from the Regulations to allow imports may be sought, a certificate of exemption would be granted only in exceptional circumstances and be subject to stringent conditions. No certificates of exemption have so far been issued for the import of asbestos from another country into Great Britain.

There is no evidence of any illegal imports of asbestos waste into Great Britain.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Petrol Industry

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reason the pricing behaviour of petrol retailers on motorways was not included in the report into the retail petrol industry by the Director General of Fair Trading published on 18 May; and if he will make a statement. [62404]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The content of the report is a matter for the Director General of Fair Trading. I am asking him to reply to the hon. Member directly.

Millennium Experience

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to refuse sponsorship for the New Millennium Experience Company from companies which are in receipt of Government grants. [61991]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* I refer the hon. Gentleman to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Montgomeryshire (Mr. Öpik) on 16 November 1998, *Official Report,* columns *421–22.*

Sombrero Island

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the application made to use the island of Sombrero, near Anguilla, as a rocket launch site; what assessment he has made of the likely effect on wildlife on the island; and if he will make a statement. [62097]

Mr. Battle: Beal Aerospace, an American company, wish to develop Sombrero Island as a satellite launch site, and have already negotiated with the Government of Anguilla an option to lease Sombrero. The Anguillan Government have negotiated conditions on the lease which include their being satisfied on the likely impact upon the environment. Beal have submitted an Environmental Impact Report on the project to the Anguillan and UK Governments.

It will be for the Anguillan Government to decide whether or not to give permission to Beal Aerospace to develop the island. The UK's role is to give whatever advice and assistance is necessary to help the Government of Anguilla make that decision. We anticipate this assistance to include providing an evaluation of the Environmental Impact Report. In the interests of transparency and open debate, the UK Government are making copies of the Environmental Impact Report available to the UK Non-Governmental Organisations who have expressed an interest. Over the next few weeks officials will be discussing with the Government of Anguilla the detailed plans for assisting them with the planning application.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62832]

Mr. Mandelson: I have two special advisers, Benjamin Wegg-Prosser and Dan Corry. They advise me and my colleagues on the full range of issues for which we are responsible.

Special Advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements. It is not appropriate to give details about particular individuals' level of security clearance.

Indonesia (Hawk Aircraft)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proportion of the purchase price for 24 Hawk aircraft *(a)* remains to be repaid by the Indonesian Government and *(b)* has subsequently been included in the rescheduling of Indonesia's international debts. [62971]

Mr. Mandelson: The information is as follows:

(a) Principal loan repayments remaining to be paid by the Indonesian Government equate with 40 per cent. of the original purchase price. The ECGD supported loan was for 80 per cent. of the purchase price.

(b) Principal instalments totalling 167 million US Dollars have been included in the rescheduling.

Export Licences

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of applications for export licences were processed by his Department within 20 days for the period 13 July to date. [61929]

Mrs. Roche: The Export Control Organisation (ECO) of DTI measures export licence processing performance against two aims:

to provide a substantive response to an application within 20 working days of receipt for applications that need to be circulated to other Government Departments according to their policy requirements ("circulated cases")

to provide such a response within 10 working days of receipt of applications that are dealt with by the DTI itself ("non-circulated cases").

In each case, full documentation in support of the application must be provided by the applicant at the outset for these targets to apply.

ECO management data on the processing of licence applications is compiled on the basis of four-week periods. The accumulated data for the periods beginning 27 June 1998 to 13 November 1998 showed that to the nearest percentage point 45 per cent. of circulated cases were finalised within 20 working days and 82 per cent. of non-circulated cases were finalised within 10 working days.

This information was taken from ECO's management data, which are compiled to monitor processing of Standard Individual Export Licences. The performance measures do not apply to applications for Open Individual Export Licences (due to wide variations between goods and country coverage of such licences), to licences covering Iran or to exports which are subject to control solely because of United Nations Sanctions.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many export licence applications were refused by the Export Control Organisation during each of the four week periods used by his Department from 29 May to date. [61931]

Mrs. Roche: The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the numbers of applications for Standard Individual Export Licences refused in full for each period are as follows:

Period	Standard individual export licences
30 May 1998—26 June 1998	9
27 June 1998—24 July 1998	4
25 July 1998—21 August 1998	10
22 August 1998—18 September 1998	10
19 September 1998—16 October 1998	10
17 October 1998—13 November 1998	9

No Open Individual Export Licences were refused in full during the period.

This information should be considered in the light of my answer to a question from my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *870–71*.

HEALTH

Investing in Dentistry

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how much money has been allocated to Investing in Dentistry up to 30 November; which health authority areas have applied for such funds to date; how much each has bid for; and how many applications have been successful in each health authority area. [62103]

Mr. Milburn: Since the Investing in Dentistry initiative was announced in September last year, grants totalling £6,843,582 have been approved. The table gives details of the health authorities who submitted Investing in Dentistry funding requests to the Secretary of State in 1997–98 and 1998–99 to date, the gross amount of funding requested, and the number of applications approved.

Investing in dentistry requests by Health Authority

£

Health Authority	Number of applications approved	Gross funding requested
Avon	4	428,100
Barnet	—	214,900
Barnsley	3	124,200
Bedfordshire	2	30,000
Berkshire	5	175,000
Bexley and Greenwich	—	396,000
Birmingham	1	76,700
Bradford	1	354,300
Bury and Rochdale	—	33,100
Calderdale and Kirklees	—	240,664
Cambridge and Huntingdon	4	396,400
City and East London	5	290,800
Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly	7	990,600
County Durham	3	332,905
Coventry	—	49,000
Doncaster	2	119,400
Dorset	2	101,597
Dudley	—	39,500
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	6	155,000
East Kent	—	518,400
East Lancashire	1	605,600
East Norfolk	3	453,800
East Riding	6	423,000
East Sussex	—	60,000
Enfield and Haringay	—	197,000
Gloucestershire	10	603,500
Herefordshire	2	60,000
Isle of Wight	2	165,000
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	—	267,000
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	2	207,000
Leeds	—	492,455
Leicestershire	2	162,100
Lincolnshire	2	130,000
Liverpool	1	147,100
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	2	95,770
Morecombe Bay	6	226,500
Newcastle and North Tyneside	2	240,311
Northamptonshire	4	70,000
North Cheshire	1	50,000
North Cumbria	5	309,300
North Derbyshire	1	60,400
North and East Devon	7	295,600
North Essex	2	38,400
North and Mid Hampshire	7	579,900
North Staffordshire	6	276,500
North West Lancashire	5	311,700
North Yorkshire	8	550,900
North West Anglia	—	90,000
Nottingham	2	222,800
Oxfordshire	6	242,000
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	8	719,400
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	4	209,700
Rotherham	6	312,700
Salford and Trafford	2	22,200
Sandwell	—	151,000
St Helens and Knowsley	3	162,100
Shropshire	7	412,000
Somerset	5	722,200
Southern Derbyshire	1	116,600
South Cheshire	7	253,500
South Essex	1	45,000
South Humber	2	83,000
South Lancashire	1	187,400
South Staffordshire	2	143,000
South West Devon	8	282,000
Southampton and South West Hampshire	8	918,800
Stockport	—	14,000
Suffolk	6	124,000
Sunderland	—	207,620
Tees	—	146,914
Walsall	—	100,500
Warwickshire	—	154,000
West Hertfordshire	1	107,900
West Kent	2	80,200
West Surrey	4	846,850
West Sussex	5	743,600
Wigan and Bolton	1	194,000
Wiltshire	14	1,128,600
Wirral	—	123,000
Wolverhampton	1	132,500
Worcestershire	1	232,000
	240	21,776,486

Note:

1. Gross funding figures have been rounded up to the nearest hundred pounds.
2. Some gross funding figures may be inflated due to the inclusion of revised or re-submitted applications.

Aspirin

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the impact on the retail price of aspirin of changes in the maximum quantities available over the counter at pharmacies. [62295]

Ms Jowell: The Department has made no assessment of the impact on the price of aspirin products, this is a matter for the Office of Fair Trading. The Director General of Fair Trading has investigated the pricing of a number of pack sizes of aspirin and paracetamol that were available over the counter before and after the introduction of the new pack sizes. He did not find any evidence of anti-competitive behaviour. The market in analgesics is very competitive and equivalent products are available at a wide variety of prices. The Director General will keep the market for analgesics under review and will investigate any anti-competitive behaviour.

Health Authority Funding Formula (South-West)

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health by what means the funding formula for health authorities in South West England takes account of the number of older people resident in them. [62386]

Mr. Milburn: The national funding formula used to inform health authorities' unified allocations includes adjustments to take account of the relative healthcare needs of different age groups. Elderly people require relatively more health care, and the target allocations of health authorities reflect this.

Bartlet Hospital, Felixstowe

Mr. Gummer: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what account he took of the closure of other local health services in considering the proposal to close the Bartlett Hospital in Felixstowe; and what assessment he made of the overall impact of the proposed closures. [62317]

Mr. Dobson: I have rejected the proposals to transfer the rehabilitation and recovery services from the Bartlet hospital, Felixstowe to Ipswich hospital until Suffolk Health Authority has undertaken a full and comprehensive review of the implications for the future of the Bartlet hospital. This must clearly take into account other local health services.

Dental Health

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will rank by English health authority those areas with the poorest dental health. [62532]

Mr. Milburn: The table ranks health authorities in England by decayed, missing or filled teeth of 5-year-old children for the year 1995–96. These results are from a survey co-ordinated by the British Association for the Study of Community Dentistry. Information for Leicestershire Health Authority is not available.

Mean decayed missing or filled teeth by health authority

Health authority	*Decayed, missing filled teeth*	*Rank*
Manchester	3.41	1
Bury and Rochdale	3.15	2
West Pennine	2.99	3
St. Helen's and Knowsley	2.91	4
Sunderland	2.84	5
East Lancashire	2.83	6
Wigan and Bolton	2.76	7
Bradford	2.60	8
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	2.39	9
Morecambe Bay	2.36	10
Camden and Islington	2.32	11
Salford and Trafford	2.31	12
Calderdale and Kirklees	2.30	13
East London and the City	2.27	14
Rotherham	2.23	15
Leeds Healthcare	2.23	16
North West Lancashire	2.22	17
County Durham Health Commission	2.21	18
Southampton and South West Hampshire	2.18	19
Wirral	2.16	20
North Cumbria	2.15	21
Wakefield Health Care	2.15	22
Barnet	2.11	23
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	2.11	24
Tees	2.11	25
South Lancashire	2.10	26
Stockport	2.08	27
Doncaster	2.08	28
Gateshead and South Tyneside	2.05	29
Northumberland	1.95	30
Sheffield	1.94	31
East Riding	1.91	32
Brent and Harrow	1.89	33
Liverpool	1.85	34
North Staffordshire	1.81	35
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	1.79	36
North Cheshire	1.78	37
Sefton	1.77	38
Barnsley	1.77	39
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	1.77	40
North Yorkshire	1.77	41
North and East Devon	1.76	42
East Norfolk	1.72	43
North Nottinghamshire	1.69	44
South and West Devon	1.67	45
Enfield and Haringey	1.65	46
Berkshire	1.65	47
Herefordshire	1.64	48
Isle of Wight Health Commisison	1.60	49
East and North Hertfordshire	1.57	50
South Humber	1.56	51
Hillingdon	1.55	52
Oxfordshire	1.51	53
Bedfordshire	1.48	54
South Cheshire	1.48	55
Cornwall and Isles of Scilly	1.47	56
Northamptonshire	1.45	57
West Kent	1.43	58
Somerset	1.43	59
Shropshire	1.43	60
South Derbyshire	1.42	61
Wolverhampton	1.41	62
Barking and Havering	1.39	63
Wiltshire	1.39	64
Croydon	1.38	65
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	1.37	66
East Surrey	1.36	67
Newcastle and North Tyneside	1.35	68
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	1.30	69
Buckinghamshire	1.29	70
Nottingham	1.29	71

Mean decayed missing or filled teeth by health authority

Health authority	*Decayed, missing filled teeth*	*Rank*
Bexley and Greenwich	1.28	72
Gloucestershire	1.28	73
Dorset	1.25	74
West Surrey	1.22	75
Coventry	1.22	76
West Hertfordshire	1.22	77
North Derbyshire	1.21	78
Cambridge and Huntingdon	1.19	79
East Sussex, Brighton and Hove	1.19	80
Bromley	1.18	81
South Essex	1.16	82
North West Anglia	1.15	83
East Kent	1.13	84
Birmingham	1.08	85
North and Mid Hampshire	1.03	86
Suffolk	1.00	87
West Sussex	0.97	88
Kingston and Richmond	0.97	89
Lincolnshire	0.97	90
Sandwell	0.95	91
Avon	0.92	92
Walsall	0.92	93
North Essex	0.88	94
Warwickshire	0.84	95
Worcestershire	0.84	96
Dudley	0.81	97
South Staffordshire	0.79	98
Solihull	0.56	99
Leicestershire	n/a	—

Source:
Data from the BASCD co-ordinated 1995–96 National Health Service Dental Epidemiological Programme survey of 5-year-old children

Dental Nurses

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what representations he has received in support of changes to the Dentists Act 1984 to allow the statutory registration of dental nurses; and if he will make a statement; [63029]

(2) how many dental nurses currently employed by the National Health Service have passed the National Certificate examination awarded by the National Examining Board for Dental Nurses; [63030]

(3) what plans he has to review the operation of the Dentists Act 1984. [63028]

Mr. Milburn: The General Dental Council has proposed that it should set up a statutory register of dental nurses, entry to which would be dependent upon the satisfactory completion of an approved training programme. We support this proposal and, in due course, will consider if measures to strengthen the existing regulatory systems of the health care professions, which we plan to include in the forthcoming National Health Service Bill, could be used to make the necessary amendments to the Dentists Act 1984. Information is not held centrally upon numbers of dental nurses, but each year some 2,000 candidates pass the examinations of the National Examining Board for Dental Nurses.

Secondments

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62821]

Ms Jowell: Central records are held on three such secondments:

Company	*Current responsibilities*
Lloyd's Bank	To provide advice on project finance issues involved in taking forward private finance initiative projects at National Health Service trusts
Pricewaterhouse Coopers	To provide advice on project finance issues involved in taking forward private finance initiative projects at NHS trusts
Ward Hathaway Solicitors	To provide advice on legal issues involved in taking forward private finance initiative projects at NHS trusts

Special Advisers

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62838]

Mr. Milburn: There are two special advisers in the Department, Mr. Simon Stevens and Mr. Joe McCrea. Special advisers advise on the full range of issues for which Ministers are responsible and are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements.

Retinal Implants

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research his Department is funding into the use of electronic retinal implants for the blind and partially-sighted. [62966]

Mr. Milburn: None at present, but the Department and the ophthalmic professions monitor the results of major research and development projects funded from other sources.

Smoking

Mrs. Lait: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the percentage of people smoking in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* 1997. [62793]

Ms Jowell: The information is not available for 1995 and 1997. Available information is as follows:

Prevalence of cigarette smoking among adults aged 16 and over, by gender
England 1994 and 1996

Percentage

	1994	*1996*
Men	28	28
Women	25	27
All persons	26	28

Note:
1. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole figures

Source:
Office of National Statistics General Household Survey

Prevalence of regular cigarette smoking among secondary school children aged 11–15 by gender
England 1994 and 1996

Percentage

	1994	*1996*
Boys	10	11
Girls	13	15
Pupils	12	13

Note:
1. Regular smokers are pupils who usually smoke at least one cigarette a week
2. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole figure
Source:
ONS Smoking among secondary school children

Neurological Diseases

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the recorded incidence per 1,000 population of *(a)* motor neurone disease, *(b)* multiple sclerosis and *(c)* Alzheimer's disease was at five-year intervals during the last 30 years. [63136]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given on 7 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *503*.

Medicines Control Agencies and Medical Devices Agencies

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what future plans there are for the Medicines Control Agency and the Medical Devices Agency. [63429]

Mr. Milburn: The Department of Health is carrying out a study to identify the longer-term organisational arrangements which will best support the effective regulation of pharmaceuticals and medical devices carried out by the Medicines Control Agency and the Medical Devices Agency respectively. The terms of reference for the study have been placed in the Library.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Immigration Appeals Tribunal

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list *(a)* the number of cases the Special Immigration Appeals Tribunal has heard since its inception, *(b)* how many of these appeals have been successful and *(c)* how many cases are pending. [61967]

Mr. Hoon: The Special Immigration Appeals Commission has so far received four appeals. None of these have yet been heard. They are all subject to Directions hearings to determine how they are to proceed to full hearing.

Land Registry Offices

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department which of the Land Registry offices his latest accommodation review has revealed as surplus to current requirements; and what action he now proposes to take with regard to them. [62895]

Mr. Hoon: The Land Registry's latest accommodation review has revealed that a sub-office (1,269 sq m) of the Gloucester District Land Registry is surplus to current requirements. The Land Registry is actively marketing the sale of the lease. Since 1990, the Land Registry has reduced its estate by some 43,000 sq m of accommodation, covering 34 sites.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department which Land Registry offices in the North West have sufficient spare capacity in terms of space or people to enable them to take on the work currently conducted by the Lytham Land Registry. [62896]

Mr. Hoon: There are no Land Registry offices in the North-West which have sufficient spare capacity in terms of space or people to enable them to take on the work currently conducted by the Lytham Land Registry.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what analysis his Department or the Land Registry has undertaken on the future of the Land Registry office in Lytham. [62897]

Mr. Hoon: An analysis by the Land Registry on the future of its office in Lytham has concluded that registration activity is projected to increase by up to 20 per cent. over the next five years following recent land registration legislation. Existing accommodation, which is operating at fully capacity, will therefore soon be insufficient to carry out its business.

The Land Registry intends to redevelop its nearby Warton site to house the registration work generated by the County of Lancashire. The existing Lytham building will cater for work generated by Greater Manchester.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will make a statement on the operational future of the Land Registry office in Lytham *(a)* in the next 12 months, *(b)* in the next three years and *(c)* in the next five years. [62898]

Mr. Hoon: In the next 12 months the Land Registry will begin to operate from its Lytham office as the Lytham District Land Registry (dealing with registrations from Greater Manchester) and the Lancashire District Land Registry (dealing with registration from Lancashire)—the latter moving to the new accommodation at nearby Warton on its completion. Over the next five years the two business units will be taking forward partnerships with local authorities to register all of their landholdings. This will bring considerable security and efficiency benefits to local authorities and to the local taxpayer.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he is currently acting on a request from the Treasury to review the property portfolio of office accommodation currently used by the Land Registry. [62899]

Mr. Hoon: A review of the property portfolio of office accommodation used by the Land Registry was carried out as part of the Government's Comprehensive Spending Review. The review identified some 13,000 sq m of accommodation as surplus to requirements and this has now been disposed of.

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the cost of operation per employee of each of the Land Registry offices. [62900]

Mr. Hoon: Excluding one-off costs, the costs of operation per employee in 1997–98 of each of the Land Registry's offices were as follows:

Offices	£
Birkenhead	21,814
Coventry	22,047
Croydon	27,358
Durham	20,372
Gloucester	23,968
Harrow	27,508
Hull	23,274
Leicester	22,008
Lytham	22,526
Nottingham	21,132
Peterborough	26,199
Plymouth	24,019
Portsmouth	26,056
Stevenage	23,487
Swansea	22,466
Telford	23,548
Tunbridge Wells	22,583
Weymouth	22,664
York	26,957

Mr. Jack: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department when he last assessed the office accommodation requirements for the Land Registry; and if he will make a statement. [62901]

Mr. Hoon: The office accommodation requirements for the Land Registry were last assessed as part of its business planning cycle and are shown in the Land Registry's Corporate Plan 1998–2003 and its published Business Plan 1998–99. Both Plans were approved by the Lord Chancellor.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Indonesia

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on assistance given by her Department for elections in Indonesia. [63388]

Clare Short: Indonesia is planning to hold Parliamentary Elections next year. Elections that are free, fair and inclusive will be essential in helping restore political and economic stability and in reversing the recent increase in poverty. We shall work towards this end with the United Nations Development Programme, which has been asked to co-ordinate donor assistance. We shall contribute up to £1 million—some of it immediately—linked to satisfactory progress with preparations for the elections.

Secondments

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development how many people in her Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if she will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62818]

Clare Short: There is currently one staff member from NRI/University of Greenwich seconded to my Department. He is Dr. Guy Poulter filling the position of Senior Natural Resources Adviser (Research) in my Department's London HQ.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Torture

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will *(a)* list the recommendations made by the UN Committee Against Torture following its examination of the UK Periodic report, *(b)* indicate what measures he will take in response, *(c)* place the observations and comments of the Committee in the Library, *(d)* list NGO submissions to the Committee concerning the UK report and *(e)* place these submissions in the Library. [61965]

Mr. Boateng: The United Nations Committee Against Torture made the following recommendations:

(a) The closure of detention centres, particularly Castlereagh, at the earliest opportunity.

(b) The reform of the State Immunity Act 1978, to ensure that its provisions conform to the obligations contained in the Convention.

(c) The reform of sections 134(4) and (5)*(b)*(iii) of the Criminal Justice Act 1988, to bring them into conformity with the obligations contained in article 2 of the Convention.

(d) The abolition of the use of plastic bullet rounds as a means of riot control.

(e) Reconstruction of the Royal Ulster Constabulary so that it more closely represents the cultural realities of Northern Ireland. This should continue to be associated with an extensive programme of re-education for members of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, directed at the objectives of the Peace accord and the best methods of modern police practices.

(f) The Committee finally recommends that, in the case of Senator Pinochet of Chile, the matter be referred to the office of the public prosecutor, with a view to examining the feasibility of and, if appropriate, initiating criminal proceedings in England, in the event that the decision is made not to extradite him. This would satisfy the State Party's obligations under articles 4 to 7 of the Convention and article 27 of the Vienna Convention on the Law of Treaties of 1969.

The Government will formally respond to the Committee in the United Kingdom's Fourth Periodic Report, which will be due in January 2002.

A copy of the Committee's conclusions and recommendations is being placed in the Library. NGO submissions were made direct to the United Nations Committee Against Torture. We are asking the Committee for the information requested and I will write to my hon. Friend when we have received a reply.

Public Interest Immunity Certificates

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* how many public interest immunity certificates he has signed in each quarter since May 1997, *(b)* how many requests for such certificates have originated in each sub-division of his Department and *(c)* how many such certificates have been issued in the course of hearings of the criminal division of the Court of Appeal. [61966]

Mr. Straw: The number of Public Interest Immunity certificates signed by me in each quarter since May 1997 is as follows:

May-July 1997: 0

August-October 1997: 4

November 1997-January 1998: 2

February-April 1998: 2

May-July 1998: 4

August-October 1998: 1

November 1998: 1.

These figures include any certificates signed by my Ministers.

Of these 14 certificates, five originated from requests made by the Prison Service and nine originated from requests made by the Security Service.

Two certificates have been issued in relation to proceedings in the Criminal Division of the Court of Appeal.

Police Dogs

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many new police dogs were taken on by the police in each of the last five years; and what percentage of these dogs were found to be unsuitable for use as working dogs following the training period. [63077]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested is not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department by whom the dog-training manuals used by police dog units are compiled; and how often they are updated. [63078]

Mr. Boateng: The current edition of the Police Dog Training and Care Manual was drawn up by members of the Home Office Standing Advisory Committee on Police Dogs and was issued to all forces in 1996. Earlier this year, the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) General Policing Committee's Police Dog Sub-Committee took over the work of the Home Office Standing Advisory Committee, including responsibility for revision of the Manual. The Manual is a standing agenda item at each meeting of the ACPO Police Dog Sub-Committee and amendments are made as and when necessary. Several amendments have been made since it was issued.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers were recruited to dog-handling sections in each of the last five years; and how many of these have left following the training period. [63076]

Mr. Boateng: The information is not collected centrally. It is for individual chief constables to decide on the number of officers who are trained in and assigned to dog handling duties.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what guidelines have been issued to police dog units responsible for training dogs, since the recent case against four police officers from the Essex Police Dog Section. [63079]

Mr. Boateng: I understand that no guidelines have yet been issued to forces, as the officers who were convicted in the Essex case have decided to appeal and the allegations were specific to one force.

Mrs. Pauline Clare, the Chief Constable of Lancashire, who chairs the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) General Policing Committee's Police Dog Sub-Committee, has, however, been in contact with Essex Police, the RSPCA, the National Canine Defence League, and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary with a view to devising a scheme for inspection of force dog training centres. In the first instance, a pilot scheme is to be initiated within Essex involving two members of the ACPO Police Dog Sub-Committee, a representative of the RSPCA, and a member of the Essex Police Authority. The ACPO Police Dog Sub-Committee will evaluate this pilot scheme in due course.

Fire Service (Dog Collars)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which fire service authorities are currently equipped with dog collars that administer electric shocks to the animals. [63081]

Mr. George Howarth: Information is not held centrally, but I am not aware of any such arrangements for dogs used by brigades to assist in fire investigations.

Rape Cases

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what progress has been made in the study he has initiated into the processing of rape cases by the criminal justice system; and when he expects to publish the full report. [63132]

Mr. Boateng: The research has been completed and a report is being prepared. We plan to publish the report in the first quarter of 1999.

Prisons (Drug Offences)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many reported drug offences have taken place in prisons in England and Wales since 1 January. [62378]

Mr. George Howarth: Provisional information for 1998 showing the number of drugs offences by prisoners proved at prison adjudication is given in the table. In addition, 831 visitors to prisoners were arrested for drug related incidents at prisons in England and Wales.

Number of drugs offences proved at adjudication in prisons in England and Wales, January to September 1998

Offence	*Number*
Refusal to provide a drug test sample	326
Falsifying a drug test sample	35
Unauthorised use of controlled drug	11,902
Possession of unauthorised drug	2,402
Sells/delivers drugs to person	69
Total	14,734

Asylum Seekers

Dr. Harris: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons from *(a)* Slovakia and *(b)* the Czech Republic have been awarded (i) refugee status and (ii) exceptional leave to remain since May 1997; and, of these, how many achieved this status following an appeal. [61683]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: For the period May 1997-October 1998, the number of initial asylum decisions made for nationals of Slovakia was 535. For that same period, the number of initial decisions made for nationals of the Czech Republic was 310. Of these, none of the above nationals was recognised as a refugee. Nor were any Slovak or Czech nationals granted exceptional leave to remain.

Manually collected records show that six Slovakian nationals were recognised as refugees following allowed appeals. A further two were granted exceptional leave to remain on compassionate grounds, following additional representations made in their cases, after an initial decision was taken to refuse them asylum. In the same period, 48 appeals were dismissed and 49 were abandoned or withdrawn.

In the case of nationals of the Czech Republic, two were recognised as refugees following appeal. A total of 36 appeals were dismissed and 25 were abandoned or withdrawn.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the cost of travel by Ministers in his Department in *(a)* RAF and *(b)* privately chartered aircraft borne by his Department (i) between 1 May 1996 and 1 May 1997 and (ii) since 1 May 1997. [60903]

Mr. Straw *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *733–34*, for the period between 2 May 1997 and 30 September 1998. Since that time, the following trips have also been undertaken:

Date	*Destination*	*Purpose*	*Numbers accompanying Minister*
November 1998	Blackpool	To attend Association of Police Authorities Conference	3
December 1998	Brussels (return to Blackpool)	Justice and Home Affairs Council	5

The average cost for these two additional flights was £1,451.50.

Campsfield House

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *134*, how the contracts relating to Campsfield House detention centre are monitored; what financial penalty has been imposed for failure to comply with the contract; and if he will make a statement. [63090]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The contract is monitored by a Home Office Contract Monitor, Group 4 senior management and an Independent Visiting Committee. Also, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons carries out inspections on all aspects of the management and performance of the contract. The contract provides for payments to be withheld to the extent of the contractor's failure to deliver the services to the required standard. Group 4's performance has been such that it has not been necessary to impose any financial penalty.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Coaker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will decide whether to issue an authority to proceed in response to the Spanish extradition request for Senator Pinochet. [63335]

Mr. Straw: I signed an authority to proceed in respect of Senator Pinochet today. The Spanish request for his extradition will now be considered by the courts. The reasons for my decision were sent to all the parties concerned in a letter from one of my officials as set out:

"1. I am writing to inform you that the Secretary of State has today signed an authority to proceed in respect of Senator Pinochet. The authority to proceed and supporting documentation are being transmitted to Bow St. I am notifying the Deputy Chief Clerk of this decision by fax. I enclose a copy of the authority to proceed for your information.

2. The Secretary of State is not under an obligation to provide reasons for his decision to sign an authority to proceed. However, in this case, and in the light of the matters raised by the representations, he has agreed to give his reasons at this stage.

Representations

3. The Secretary of State received notification, before the House of Lords judgment on 25 November, that he would be receiving representations for and against the issue of an authority to proceed.

4. Although there is no provision in the Extradition Act ("the Act") for representations at this stage in extradition proceedings, he has taken careful account of these in making his decision; in particular representations made to him by legal representatives of Senator Pinochet, the Spanish Government, the Chilean Government and legal representatives for "the Interveners" before the House of Lords. He also received material from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and the Ministry of Defence.

5. The decision to issue an Authority to Proceed was taken personally by the Secretary of State.

Requests from the French and Swiss Governments

6. The Secretary of State received formal extradition requests for Senator Pinochet from the Spanish Government on 11 November 1998, from the Swiss Government later the same day, and from the French Government on 13 November 1998.

7. The Secretary of State has considered these requests, and further material made available by the Swiss Government, under section 12(5) of the Act and Article 17 of the European Convention on Extradition ("ECE"). He has given precedence to the Spanish request, and notified the French and Swiss Governments accordingly.

The Secretary of State's approach to his decision

8. He has taken his decision under section 7(4) of the Act, which provides:

(4) On receipt of any such request the Secretary of State may issue an authority to proceed unless it appears to him that an order for the return of the person concerned could not lawfully be made, or would not in fact be made, in accordance with the provisions of this Act.

9. The Secretary of State has taken the approach that if it already appears to him that no order for the return of Senator Pinochet to Spain could lawfully be made, or would in fact be made, then he should not issue an authority to proceed. If those conditions do not exist he has a discretion whether or not to issue an authority to proceed.

10. He has had regard to the relevant extradition arrangement, namely the ECE. The UK's obligation is to extradite Senator Pinochet to Spain consistently with the ECE. That is a consideration to which the Secretary of State gives particular weight.

11. In reaching his decision, the Secretary of State has considered the application of the Act to the Spanish request and all the general restrictions on surrender in sections 6 and 12 of the Act.

Extradition crimes

12 Section 1 of the Act provides that where, as in the case of Spain, extradition procedures under Part III of the Act are available, a person in the United Kingdom who: "is accused in that state of the commission of an extradition crime" may be arrested and returned to that state in accordance with those procedures.

13. The Secretary of State considers that Senator Pinochet is accused, in Spain, of offences equivalent to UK offences of attempted murder, conspiracy to murder, torture, conspiracy to torture, hostage taking and conspiracy to take hostages.

14. Senator Pinochet is also charged, under Spanish law, with genocide, and the CPS advised, on behalf of the Spanish Government, that murder is also disclosed by the request. The Secretary of State does not consider that the contents of the extradition request satisfied the definition of an extradition crime under section 2 of the Act in respect of these offences, and has therefore not included them in the authority to proceed.

15. The relevant test under the Act was explained by the Lord Chief Justice in the Divisional Court (with whom the other judges agreed) who said: "What is necessary [for the definition of extradition crime in s. 2] is that *at the time of the extradition request* (rather than at the time of the conduct alleged; emphasis supplied) the offence should be a criminal offence here, ..."

16. The Secretary of State has proceeded on the basis that he is entitled, at this stage of the extradition proceedings against Senator Pinochet, to treat the Spanish request as well-founded as a matter of Spanish law.

Sovereign or diplomatic immunity

17. The Secretary of State has also proceeded on the basis that Senator Pinochet does not enjoy any immunity in relation to the offences in question. He has not accepted a representation made on behalf of Senator Pinochet that he should disregard the House of Lords judgment on the grounds of alleged bias on the part of one of the law lords. Nor does it appear to him that Senator Pinochet is entitled to diplomatic immunity or protection as the head of a special mission.

General restrictions

18. The Secretary of State has considered all the general restrictions on surrender in sections 6 and 12 of the Act. In particular, he has had regard to:

Political Offences (section 6(1)(a))

19. Section 24 of the Act provides that no offence to which section 1 of the Suppression of Terrorism Act applies can be regarded as an offence of a political character. Since Spain is a designated country for the purposes of section 24, the Secretary of State considers that all the offences that are to be included in the authority to proceed fall within this provision. In any event it does not appear to him that the offences charged are of a political character.

Punishment for political opinions (sections 6(1)(c) and (d))

20. The Secretary of State does not consider that there are good grounds for concluding that the request has been issued for this purpose.

The passage of time (section 12(2)(a)(ii))

21. The Secretary of State has not been notified by the Spanish Government that any of the offences for which extradition is sought are time barred from prosecution, and considers that it is reasonable to proceed at this stage on the footing that no relevant time bar appears to apply.

22. Nor does the Secretary of State consider that the passage of time would render it unjust or oppressive to issue an authority to proceed in this case. It does not appear that Senator Pinochet is unfit to stand trial. The offences for which return has been sought are serious, and in the nature of those for which, domestically, passage of time would not be regarded as restricting prosecution. The case is an accusation case and, ordinarily, the reliability of witnesses' memories may properly be regarded as a matter for the court of prosecution.

Accusation not made in good faith in the interests of justice (section 12(2)(a)(iii))

23. The Secretary of State does not believe that there are good grounds for concluding that the request has been issued other than in good faith in the interests of justice.

The Secretary of State's discretion

24. The Secretary of State has considered the ambit of his discretion under section 7(4) and his residual general discretion under section 12 of the Act, which would apply in relation to the return of Senator Pinochet were he to be committed by the Bow Street magistrate under section 9 of the Act. Contrary to certain of the representations made to him, he has been advised that the discretion conferred upon him is wide, and he has therefore taken a range of factors into consideration.

25. A large number of points were raised in representations concerning the Secretary of State's discretion, including aspects of issues that fall to be considered under the general restrictions on return contained in the Act. In particular, the Secretary of State has had regard to the following:

Humanitarian considerations

26. Representations were made on behalf of the Senator that his age and health would render it unjust or oppressive to issue an authority to proceed. The Secretary of State has considered these carefully, but concluded that it does not appear that the Senator is unfit to stand trial and concluded that in all the circumstances it would not be unjust or oppressive for him to stand trial in relation to the offences with which he is charged. The Secretary of State also has in mind that this question, among others, can be re-examined in the light of any developments, at the stage when he comes to exercise his final discretion at the end of the extradition process, under section 12 of the Act.

Pending proceedings in Chile

27. The Chilean Government argued that Senator Pinochet should be returned to Chile where he could stand trial. However, there is no extradition request from the Chilean Government, which the Secretary of State could consider under section 12(5) of the Act. Moreover, there is no provision of international law which excludes Spain's jurisdiction in this matter. The Secretary of State does not consider the possibility of a trial in Chile to be a factor which outweighs the UK's obligations under the ECE to extradite Senator Pinochet to Spain.

Other factors

28. The Secretary of State has also considered other factors, under his general discretion, including:

(i) the possible effect of extradition proceedings on the stability of Chile, and its future democracy; and

(ii) the possible effect of extradition proceedings on the UK national interest.

29. He has concluded that the material and representations put before him do not amount to sufficient grounds not to issue an authority to proceed.

Conclusion

30. In the event that Senator Pinochet is committed to await the Secretary of State's decision on his return, the Secretary of State will consider the extradition request afresh under section 12 of the Act. At that stage he will be able to take into account any findings in the committal proceedings and any habeas corpus proceedings as well as any further representations which Senator Pinochet may wish to make against return.

31. If Senator Pinochet decides to apply for leave to move for judicial review of the Secretary of State's decision, he reserves the right to expand upon the reasons given in this letter in an affidavit to be sworn by one of his officials."

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the reduction in the cost of state earnings-related pensions arising from *(a)* the changes contained in legislation basing pension entitlement on lifetime earnings, and related changes and *(b)* the changes contained in the Pensions Act 1995 in (i) 2000, (ii) 2010, (iii) 2030 and (iv) 2040. [61440]

Mr. Denham: The information is in the table.

Reduction in expenditure arising from the 1986 pensions act and the 1995 Pensions Act

£ billion

	2001–02	*2010–11*	*2030–31*	*2040–41*
1986 Pensions Act[1]	0.0	–3.1	–25.0	–33.1
1995 Pensions Act[2]	0.0	–0.9	–7.5	–10.6

Notes:

1. The figures are approximations based on figures from the Social Security Bill 1986, Report by the Government Actuary on the Financial Effects of the Bill on the National Insurance Fund (Cmnd 9711) assuming an extra 5 million contract out, and the Report by the Government Actuary on the Financial Effects of the Pensions Bill 1994 on the National Insurance Fund (Cmnd 2714).
2. The figures are based on the Report by the Government Actuary on the Financial Effects of the Pensions Bill 1994 on the National Insurance Fund (Cmnd 2714).
3. Estimates do not take account of means-tested benefit offsets.
4. Estimates are in respect of retirement pensioners only.
5. Figures are 1998–99 benefit rates and are rounded to the nearest £0.1 billion.

Source:

The Government Actuary's Department.

Gulf War Veterans

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the policy is of the War Pensions Agency on the seven year rule towards Gulf War veteran claimants. [62959]

Mr. Timms: War Pension legislation applies to Gulf War veterans in the same way as to all ex-service personnel claiming a War Pension. Anyone who considers that disablement may be due to service in the Gulf may claim a War Pension at any time after leaving H.M. Forces.

Where a claim is made within seven years of termination of service there is no onus on the claimant to show that disablement is due to service. Even where a claim is made more than seven years after termination of service, it is only necessary for there to be reliable evidence to create a reasonable doubt that disablement might be due to, or aggravated by, service. The benefit of that reasonable doubt is always given to the claimant.

The Secretary of State may review a decision to reject a claim at any time and on any grounds. Where a claim made within seven years of termination of service is later reviewed, the same conditions of proof which applied at the time the claim was made apply to the review.

SCOTLAND

Scottish Enterprise

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what the current limits are on the borrowing powers of Scottish Enterprise. [62954]

Mr. Dewar: There is no specified limit on the borrowing powers of Scottish Enterprise. However, Section 25(2) of the Enterprise and New Towns (Scotland) Act 1990 limits the aggregate amount of central government funding that Scottish Enterprise can receive including its general external borrowings. The limit is defined as the aggregate amount outstanding (AAO) and was set by the Scottish Enterprise (Aggregate Amount Outstanding) Order 1997 at £3,000 million. The AAO is made up of the following elements (with the level of funding at 31 March 1998 given in parenthesis): sums issued by the Secretary of State or the Treasury, in fulfilment of guarantees (nil); loans guaranteed by Scottish Enterprise or its subsidiaries (£0.3 million); payments from the Secretary of State consisting of grant-in-aid less administrative expenses plus voted loan payments (£2,470 million); and the general external borrowings of Scottish Enterprise and its subsidiaries (£3 million).

Roads

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many classified roads cross from Scotland to England. [62955]

Mr. Macdonald: My right hon. Friend is responsible for the four trunk roads (the A1, A68, A7 and A74 (M)) which cross from Scotland to England. Information on other classified roads is not held centrally.

Sustainable Development

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how the sustainable development indicators announced by the Deputy Prime Minister on 23 November 1998 will be applied to Scotland; and if he will make a statement. [62786]

Mr. Macdonald: The Government published "Sustainability Counts", a consultation paper on a set of headline indicators of sustainable development, as part of the revision of the Strategy for sustainable development for the United Kingdom. A definitive set of indicators will be published with the Strategy. In the longer term, it will be for the Scottish Parliament to decide its own approach to sustainable development, which may include the adoption of an appropriate set of indicators.

Countryside Premium Scheme

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many applications were received by his Department for grants for use in 1999 under the Countryside Premium Scheme; and how many of these applications were successful. [62785]

Mr. Macdonald: A total of 953 Countryside Premium Scheme applications were received this year, of which just over 500 are expected to be successful.

PRIME MINISTER

Duty Free

Mr. Gale: To ask the Prime Minister what discussions relating to the future of duty-free shopping were instigated by the Government at the Anglo-French Summit in St. Malo on Thursday 3 and Friday 4 December; and if he will make a statement. [62851]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* At the Franco-British Summit in St. Malo the United Kingdom and France both saw a clear case for looking again at the 1991 decision to abolish duty-free sales within the European Union at the end of June 1999; but noted that unanimity would be required to amend the 1991 decision.

TREASURY

Age Discrimination

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many Inland Revenue staff were required to retire before their contractual retirement age in each of the last three years. [62495]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue has a contractual retirement age of 60, regardless of gender or grade, and this has been in place for many years. There are a number of retirement schemes, the majority of which are voluntary. If a member of staff was required to retire, it would be under the compulsory retirement or severance schemes, or if medical grounds were involved, under the ill health retirement scheme.

There have been no compulsory redundancies or severances in the last three financial years, nor any to date in the current year. The number of ill health retirements are detailed in the table.

Number of ill health retirements of Inland Revenue staff

Year	Number
1995–96	396
1996–97	373
1997–98	376
1998–99	149

As is the case for all Civil Service ill health retirements, these must be approved by BMI Health Services. It is not possible to distinguish between people who requested to retire on ill health grounds and those who were required to do so. It is probable that those who requested to retire would be in the majority.

Dog Collars (Customs and Excise)

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which sections of HM Customs and Excise are currently using dog collars that administer electric shocks to the animals. [63080]

Dawn Primarolo: HM Customs and Excise does not use collars which administer electric shocks on any of its dogs.

Art Collections (Access)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps his Department is taking to improve the advertising of access to private works of art for which the owner receives tax relief for providing such access; and if he will make a statement. [62381]

Dawn Primarolo: In return for conditional tax exemption, owners of heritage assets have to provide reasonable public access to those assets and to publicise the agreed access arrangements. Most conditionally exempt works of art are displayed in houses, museums and galleries open to the public. Others which are not on public display are listed on the Inland Revenue's Register of conditionally exempt works of art, which is available on the Internet.

The Finance Act 1998 strengthened the rules of the conditional exemption scheme to ensure, among other things, that the public are better informed about their rights to see conditionally exempt assets. In future, owners of all conditionally exempt assets will be required, as a minimum, to advertise access arrangements through the Inland Revenue's Internet site. Owners will also be required to disclose information about the terms of the exemption.

Export Levies

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much has been raised in levies on British exports to non-EU countries in each of the last five years; and what is the estimated figure for the current year. [63102]

Dawn Primarolo: Figures for receipts of export levies (which apply only to certain agricultural products) are available from 1994–95. They are as follows:

£

Year	Amount
1994–95	5,600
1995–96	202,371
1996–97	295,679
1997–98	50,111

No monies are expected to be raised from export levies in 1998–99.

Non-EU Imports

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how much has been raised from duties on imports from non-EU countries in each of the last five years; and what is the estimated figure for the current year. [63103]

Dawn Primarolo: Net receipts of customs duties and agricultural levies on imports from non-EU countries have been as follows:

Year	*£ million*
1993–94	2,169.4
1994–95	2,164.5
1995–96	2,479.5
1996–97	2,299.5
1997–98	2,263.3

The latest estimate for 1998–99, as published in the Pre Budget Report, is £2.0 billion.

VAT

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his latest estimate of the yield from VAT in the current financial year; and what is his estimate of its yield in 1999–2000. [63100]

Dawn Primarolo: The latest forecasts for VAT (as published in the November 1998 Pre Budget Report) in 1998–99 and 1999–2000 are £52.6 billion and £55.0 billion respectively.

Supplementary Tax Allowances

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the number of married couples over 65 years of age who are *(a)* receiving the full benefit of the married couples' supplementary tax allowance and *(b)* receiving no benefit or part benefit from those tax allowances. [62629]

Dawn Primarolo: Latest estimates for the number of married couples where one partner is aged 65 or more for 1998–99 are as follows:

	Thousand
	Number of couples
(a) Receiving the full benefit of the appropriate age related married couple's allowance	930
(b) Receiving no benefit or part benefit of the supplementary age related married couple's allowance (including non-taxpayers)	1,940

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the additional costs to the Treasury, for the current year, of supplementary tax allowances for the age-related personal allowance paid to citizens who are *(a)* aged 65 to 74 and *(b)* 75 years and over; and what is the total cost of age-related supplement incorporated into the married couples' allowance for the current year. [62627]

Dawn Primarolo: Estimated costs for 1998–99 of the excess of the aged personal and married couples' allowances over the corresponding allowances for non-aged taxpayers are as follows.

	Allowance	*£ billion*
a.	Taxpayers aged (65 to 74)—personal allowance	0.5
b.	Taxpayers aged (75 and over)—personal allowance	0.4
c.	Taxpayers aged (65 and over)—married couples' allowance	0.2

Savings

Mr. Field: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the number of *(a)* individuals and *(b)* households with savings (i) below £1,000, (ii) between £1,000 and £5,000, (iii) between £5,000 and £10,000 and (iv) above £10,000; and if these figures exclude pension fund entitlements. [62631]

Dawn Primarolo: Information on the estimated distribution of savings held by individuals is given in the table. Similar information on the distribution of savings held by households is shown in Table 5.9 of Family Resources Survey 1996–97, a copy of which is in the Library. Neither includes the value of accrued pension rights.

	Number of adults[1] *(million)*
Total	46.0
No savings or investments	14.0
With savings or investments	32.0
Less than £1,000	14.5
£1,000 but less than £5,000	8.0
£5,000 but less than £10,000	3.1
£10,000 or more	6.4

[1] Population aged 16 or over

Source:
Financial Research Survey by NOP (March 1997–February 1998)

CABINET OFFICE

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is the e-mail address of the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury. [52880]

Mr. Kilfoyle: My right hon. Friend the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury does not have an E-mail address.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62844]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Minister for the Cabinet Office has appointed two Special Advisers—Ms Anna Healy and Mr. Tim Walker—who provide advice on the full range of issues for which he is responsible. In addition, the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator, Mr. Keith Hellawell, and his Deputy, Mr. Michael Trace have been working in the Cabinet Office since July 1998 when the responsibility for co-ordination of anti-drugs activity was transferred from the President of the Council to my right hon. Friend.

My right hon. Friend, the Leader of the House of Lords, Lord Privy Seal and Minister for Women has two special advisers, paid for from the Cabinet Office vote. Ms Clare Cozens advises on legislative strategy and parliamentary procedure, and policy across government. Ms Jo Gibbons advises on the presentation and co-ordination of policies which fall within my right hon. Friend's area of responsibility.

My right hon. Friend, the Government Chief Whip has two special advisers paid for from the Cabinet Office vote. Ms Sue Jackson and Mr. Ian McKenzie provide advice on the full range of issues for which the Government Chief Whip is responsible.

The special advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Arms Embargo (Argentina)

Mr. Savidge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if there have been any new exceptions to the arms embargo on Argentina. [63430]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: A licence has recently been issued to allow the export of nine sets of gun rings and smoke grenade launchers to be mounted on armoured personnel carriers in service with the Argentine contingent of the UN forces in Cyprus. This decision represented an exception but not a change to the arms embargo on Argentina.

Cyprus

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the United Nations Special Representative on Cyprus, regarding her negotiations on the Cyprus issue; and if he will make a statement. [62597]

Ms Quin: We remain firmly committed to supporting UN efforts towards a comprehensively political settlement in Cyprus. We warmly welcomed the UN Secretary-General's 30 September announcement of a process for on-island contacts with both parties, led by the UN Deputy Special Representative for Cyprus, Dame Ann Hercus, aimed at reducing tensions and promoting progress towards a just and lasting settlement. Dame Ann has secured the agreement of the two parties to treat discussions within this process as confidential. We respect this, and urge both sides to co-operate in a constructive and flexible manner with Dame Ann, with whom we maintain close contact through our High Commissioner in Nicosia.

Secondments

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62829]

Mr. Fatchett: There are currently 23 staff seconded from the private sector to the FCO. Full details are as listed.

Inward secondments from the private sector

Name	*Company/Organisation*	*Post*	*Position*
Substantive appointments to posts in London or overseas			
A. Hefferman	China Britain Trade Group	Peking	1st Secretary Commercial
N. Collier	Bank of England	UKREP Brussels	1st Secretary Economic and Finance
T. McLaughlin	British Nuclear Fuels	Tokyo	Counsellor Atomic Energy
A. Vaudrey	Civil Aviation Authority	Washington	Civil Air Attache
J. Paxman	BP	Washington	1st Secretary Environment
J. McPherson	European Investment Bank	Ankara	1st Secretary Commercial
P. Jones	BBC	Research Department FCO	Research Officer
I. Sayers	Standard Chartered Bank	South East Asia Department FCO	Desk Officer
Appointments to commercial posts under the short term business attachment scheme			
M. Stephenson	Midland Bank	Kuala Lumpur	Commercial Attache
R. Pitfield	Taylor Woodrow	New York	Commercial Attache
D. Watson	AMEC	Johannesburg	Commercial Attache
R. Curwen	Brown and Root	Oslo	Commercial Attache
J. de la Paz	Gifford and Partners	Mexico	Commercial Attache
P. Shortt	GLE	UKREP Brussels	Commercial Attache
P. Forrest	Moscow Narodny Bank	Moscow	Commercial Attache
D. Johnson	Mouchel	Hong Kong	Commercial Attache
D. Musco	Hayter Ltd	Cairo	Commercial Attache
Staff seconded to overseas posts on inward investment work			
M. Davies	Barclays	Sydney	Commercial Attache
S. Wayne	Barclays	Los Angeles	Commercial Attache
J. Butler	BT	New York	Commercial Attache
M. Mullins	National Westminster Bank	New York	Commercial Attache
J. Wood	York & Humberside Dev. Agency	Chicago	Commercial Attache
J. Enefer	Ernst & Young	San Francisco	Commercial Attache

Edgar Fernandes

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what meetings the Minister of State, the right hon. Member for Leeds, Central (Mr. Fatchett), had with officials to discuss the case of Edgar Fernandes during his visit to Turkey on 18 to 19 November. [62598]

Mr. Fatchett: The prime purpose of my visit to Turkey, which took place on 17–19 November, was to promote British trade. I held a meeting with the then Deputy Prime Minister, Bulent Ecevit, at which Iraq, human rights and terrorism were the key subjects. It was not possible to discuss the case of Edgar Fernandes although, in my discussions with the British Consul General in Istanbul, I was briefed on the latest developments in the case.

Hawk Aircraft (Indonesia)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps he has taken to ensure that Hawk aircraft recently sold to Indonesia will not be used for the purposes of internal repression; and if he will make a statement. [62970]

Mr. Fatchett: 16 Hawk Aircraft were licensed by the previous Administration in October 1996. The Indonesian authorities are well aware of the Government's position on human rights.

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received regarding the sale of 16 Hawk aircraft to Indonesia. [62969]

Mr. Fatchett: We have received a number of representations from Members of Parliament, NGOs and members of the public on the question of the sale of Hawk aircraft to Indonesia.

Strategic Arms Exports (Annual Report)

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects the annual report on strategic arms exports to be published. [63093]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Ruislip-Northwood (Mr. Wilkinson) on 27 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *385*.

WALES

National Assembly Members (Salaries)

9. **Mr. Syms:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he will make a decision on salaries for elected representatives in the National Assembly. [61567]

19. **Mr. Nicholas Winterton:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he plans to determine the salaries payable to elected representatives in the Welsh Assembly. [61578]

Mr. Michael: I am not yet in a position to say when I shall make this decision.

I have received a first stage report from the Senior Salary Review Body, which makes recommendations on the pay of ordinary Members, personal travel and subsistence payments and pensions and severance. I am currently considering it.

National Minimum Wage

10. **Mr. Touhig:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many people in Wales will benefit from the national minimum wage. [61568]

11. **Mr. Ruane:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many people in Wales will benefit from the national minimum wage. [61569]

Mr. Hain: Latest research shows that 109,000 people in Wales will benefit from the national minimum wage.

Manufacturing Industry

12. **Mr. Barry Jones:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to assist manufacturing industry in Wales. [61570]

Mr. Hain: The Government are pursuing policies to deliver long-term economic stability, the essential platform for encouraging high levels of growth and employment.

Farming (Aid)

13. **Ms Lawrence:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the impact on Wales of the recent package of aid for British farming. [61571]

17. **Mr. Edwards:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the impact on Wales of the recent package of aid for British farming. [61576]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The aid package, worth over £21 million to Welsh farmers, has helped to alleviate the forecast drop in farm incomes for 1998–99. The income figures published last week show that without the additional resources the Net Farm Income for mixed cattle and sheep farms in the Less Favoured Areas of Wales was forecast to fall by 66 per cent. The effect of the package has been to reduce that decline by around a half, to 32 per cent.

Education Expenditure

14. **Mr. Gareth Thomas:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the increase in expenditure on education in Wales in 1999–2000. [61572]

Mr. Hain: In July this year we announced indicative increases in education spending of £110 million in 1999–2000, £250 million in 2000–01 and £370 million in 2001–02. These include increases in local authority spending on education.

Decisions on allocations for education and other services are being announced in the statement on the local government revenue settlement.

New Deal

15. **Mr. Rowlands:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the future development of the New Deal in Wales. [61573]

Mr. Hain: The New Deal is progressively being extended to help more people who want to find work. At the beginning of November, measures were introduced to help Disabled People and the New Deal for Lone Parents was extended from the pilot area to cover the whole of Wales. Last week we saw the introduction of pilots in West Wales and Bridgend/Rhondda Cynon Taff which brought the New Deal for Over 25s within the range of those who have been unemployed for 12 and 18 months respectively.

Ministerial Travel

16. **Mr. Jack:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his Department's planned expenditure on ministerial travel for 1998–99 within Wales. [61575]

Mr. Michael: It is not possible to give a specific figure for ministerial travel as the money allocated is subsumed within wider travel and subsistence budgets.

Waterhouse Child Abuse Inquiry

18. **Mr. Paice:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he received the report by Sir Ronald Waterhouse into child abuse in North Wales; and when he expects to publish its conclusions. [61577]

Mr. Michael: I expect to receive the Tribunal's report early in the new year. It will be presented to the House as soon as possible thereafter.

Steelmaking

20. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement about the competitiveness of steelmaking in Wales. [61579]

Mr. Hain: The Welsh steel industry is among the most competitive in the world. However, like others, it is experiencing difficult trading conditions. The industry is therefore undertaking a range of measures to maintain its competitiveness, such as the introduction of new technology and team working. In particular British Steel has recently completed a £121m investment in a new continuous annealing process line at Port Talbot. This is the biggest single investment since privatisation and represents a massive vote of confidence in the Welsh steel Industry.

Structural Funds

21. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the work of the taskforce established to maximise benefits from European structural funds. [61580]

Mr. Hain: The Taskforce was established on 16 October 1998 and has been charged with advising my right hon. Friend on Welsh interests in the ongoing negotiation of the draft Structural Funds Regulations for the period 2000–06 and considering, advising and co-ordinating the preparation of a national development strategy and related operational programmes to implement Structural Funds investment in Wales over that period.

As part of this process, it has established working groups to examine the needs of the Welsh economy both by sector and by region and also to work up strategic and local priorities. Its work embraces a wide range of partners to enable it to command the greatest possible degree of participation and ownership.

First Minister

22. **Mr. Robathan:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what representations he has received regarding the powers of First Minister of the Welsh National Assembly. [61581]

Mr. Michael: I have received no such representations.

National Assembly Members (Election)

23. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will review the arrangements for election of additional members to the National Assembly. [61582]

Mr. Michael: No. The return of members for the Assembly's electoral regions will be made in accordance with the provisions of the Government of Wales Act 1998.

Consultant Referral Waiting Times

24. **Mr. Walter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement about waiting times for patients awaiting referral to a consultant. [61583]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Latest published information shows that 93 per cent. of patients waiting for a first outpatient appointment were seen within six months, (79 per cent. within three months). In addition, 95 per cent. of patients waiting for inpatient/daycase treatment in hospital were seen within 12 months (78 per cent. within three months).

Lobbyists

25. **Mr. Flynn:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his policy on the role of lobbyists in informing decisions taken by his Department. [61584]

Mr. Michael: Lobbyists play no role in decisions made by my Department.

Territorial Army

26. **Mr. Laurence Robertson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the impact on local communities of the closure of nine Territorial Army centres in Wales. [61585]

Mr. Hain: Six Territorial Army Centres in Wales are to close of which two are not currently in use. Twenty two Territorial Army centres will remain in use: 17 in South Wales, 5 in North Wales, plus 3 centres are to be retained for cadets.

The Ministry of Defence have listened to the responses which resulted from the consultative documents with the results that the current complement in Wales of 2,982 will be reduced by 435, a reduction of 14.6 per cent., the lowest of any UK region.

NHS Trusts

27. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his proposals for NHS trusts. [61586]

28. **Mr. Llew Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the NHS Trust proposals for Wales. [61587]

29. **Mr. Denzil Davies:** To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the reconfiguration of NHS trusts in Wales. [61588]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I refer my hon. Friends to the answer to my hon. Friend the Member for the Vale of Glamorgan (Mr. Smith), 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 309.

Local Government Finance

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what his proposals are for local government revenue spending and grant support in 1999–2000; and what his plans are for the following two years. [63603]

Mr. Michael: Following the Comprehensive Spending Review and extensive consultation on my spending priorities in Wales, I propose that total standard spending in 1999–2000 should be £3,243 million, an increase of £143 million or 4.6 per cent. on the comparable figure for 1998–99.

This is a good settlement for local government and for Wales as a whole. It is not just about money but about partnership. It paves the way for the co-operation I have offered to the leaders of local authorities which is aimed at improving services and extending opportunity everywhere in Wales. It also sets the scene for a strong partnership between the National Assembly for Wales and local government which I believe is essential for the success of both.

The increase includes an additional £70 million revenue spending for education and extra provision so that local authorities can:

improve children's services in line with the Government's response to the report by Sir William Utting;

provide at least half price bus transport for pensioners from April 1999; and

implement a new regime to deal with contaminated land with effect from 1 July 1999.

I announced details of the settlement for police authorities on 2 December 1998.

I propose to set aggregate external finance at £2,827 million, of which I plan to make available £1,914 million in revenue support grant and council tax reduction scheme grant, £656 million in redistributed business rates and £257 million for specific grants.

I propose that the non-domestic rate poundage for Wales should rise by 3.2 per cent. in line with the Retail Prices Index for the 12 months to September 1998, giving a rate of 44.3p in the pound for 1999–2000.

There will be a scheme to limit council tax increases; it will be similar to the targeted scheme that operated for 1998–99 and I will announce further details shortly.

I also intend that there should be new arrangements for council tax benefit subsidy, to prevent the full cost of excessive council tax increases being passed onto the national tax payer in the form of higher subsidy payments. The arrangements will apply to county and county borough councils only in 1999–2000, and the National Assembly for Wales will be able to extend them to police authorities the following year.

I expect local authorities to budget prudently, and I am prepared to use my capping powers if they decide to make excessive increases in council tax.

Looking ahead to the following two years my plans provide for total standard spending and aggregate external finance (net of specific grants) to be as reflected in the table. The National Assembly will take the final decisions. My proposals for 1999–2000, on the same net basis, are also given for comparative purposes:

	1999–2000	*2000–01*	*2001–02*
Net TSS (£ million)	2,986	3,128	3,279
Of which Net AEF (£ million)	2,570	2,671	2,778
Percentage increase in net TSS	5.1	4.8	4.8
Real terms percentage increase in net TSS	2.5	2.2	2.3

Further information on the proposed settlement, including details for individual authorities and the detailed arrangements for council tax benefit subsidy, will be announced shortly. I will also be discussing with the Welsh Local Government Association a range of performance measures linked to this announcement.

My Department has written today to the Welsh Local Government Association and all local authorities in Wales to initiate a consultation on my proposals for next year's settlement. Copies of the consultation letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much money was allocated in the 1998–99 standard spending assessment to each local authority in Wales to repay capital debt. [62652]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: There are no separately identifiable allocations within standard spending assessments for repayment of debt. The amounts in respect of overall capital charges included in the 1998–99 standard spending assessments are given in the following table.

	£000
Isle of Anglesey	6,772
Gwynedd	10,608
Conwy	8,659
Denbighshire	9,015
Flintshire	12,691
Wrexham	9,739
Powys	12,603
Ceredigion	5,696
Pembrokeshire	10,800
Carmarthenshire	14,353
Swansea	22,312
Neath Port Talbot	12,529
Bridgend	10,882
The Vale of Glamorgan	9,011
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	17,065
Merthyr Tydfil	5,019
Caerphilly	12,061
Blaenau Gwent	7,606
Torfaen	8,982
Monmouthshire	5,469
Newport	13,204
Cardiff	24,236
Dyfed-Powys Police	649
Gwent Police	821
North Wales Police	678
South Wales Police	2,412
Total Unitary Authorities	249,311
Total Police Authorities	4,560
Total Wales	253,871

Capital charges cover repayment of debt, interest payments on outstanding debt, non-operational leasing charges, and for the police authorities capital expenditure charged to the revenue account. The figures are net of capital financing grants.

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures his Department has taken to encourage local authorities in Wales to repay debt. [62653]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Local authorities' new borrowing is regulated by the issue of credit approvals in accordance with Government policy. Authorities have a statutory duty to make provision to meet their existing debts. It is for them to decide whether it would be prudent to repay any loan before they are contractually required to do so.

National Assembly

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assumptions he has made about the workload of the National Assembly for Wales up to autumn 1999 in planning his work in 1999. [62365]

Mr. Michael: My officials are identifying the business the Assembly will need to address in its early days, based on the emerging standing orders, the draft Transfer of Functions Order, the work currently in hand in the Welsh Office and the Government's programme of legislation. I shall share this forward look with the leaders of the political parties in Wales so that we can work towards a common understanding of the likely early demands on the Assembly's time.

Ethnic Minorities

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what action he is taking in response to the report of the Commission for Racial Equality about the treatment of ethnic minority people in Wales. [62528]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: A Survey of current Secondary Health Care Practice was prepared by the NHS Wales Equality Unit in partnership with the Commission for Racial Equality. I attended the launch of the report on 30 November 1998 and gave the Department's support to its recommendation that health care should be accessible, fair and without disadvantage. Welsh Office officials will be meeting the Commission for Racial Equality to consider the issues further.

Welsh Development Agency

Mr. Gareth Thomas: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the management of the Welsh Development Agency following the recent resignations of senior staff. [62363]

Mr. Hain: The WDA expects some turnover of its staff in the normal course of events and this always presents an opportunity to strengthen the organisation. I am confident that the management team in place will be able to deliver the challenging agenda which Government have set.

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what assessment he has made of the adequacy of action being taken within the Welsh Office to deal with the problem of the millennium bug. [63094]

Mr. Michael: In common with all Departments the Welsh Office completes a Quarterly Return to the Central Computer and Telecommunications Agency on the progress towards achieving Millennium compliance of it's internal systems and the general state of readiness of the wider public sector in Wales.

These returns are published on the Internet and copies are placed in the Library of the House. The last returns were published on 2 December.

I am currently satisfied with my Departments progress towards achieving Millennium date change compliance but will keep that progress under review.

Nurses

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he proposes to take to improve morale amongst nurses. [62697]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The Department is preparing a Strategic Framework for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting in Wales following consultation with the health service. It will set out the vital contribution that the profession makes to the health service.

As an integral part of the Human Resource Strategy for Wales we will set the NHS targets to improve its record as an employer which will mean improving the quality of life of staff and their access to continuing professional development.

The Government are committed to a fair and affordable pay settlement which will have a positive impact on the nursing profession. The Nurses Pay Review Body is currently considering evidence from the trade unions, Health Departments and employers and will make recommendations on pay levels to take effect on 1 April 1999. The Government will make an announcement early in the new year.

Steel Imports

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what discussions he has had with the Chairman of British Steel plc concerning imports of steel products from the Far East; and if he will make a statement. [62699]

Mr. Hain: None, but the Welsh Office maintains close contact with British Steel and my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, met the Chairman of British Steel plc on 17 November to discuss this and a range of other issues affecting the steel industry.

The Government consistently press for strict rules contained in the Steel Aid Code to be applied rigorously by Member States and for stringent monitoring and enforcement by the Commission. This has contributed to a climate in which illegal state aids have declined significantly in importance as a problem for the UK steel industry.

Where any cases give rise to concern, the Government are always willing to examine any evidence put forward, and to consider what action might be appropriate.

Direct Labour Departments

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the losses that will be made by local authority direct labour departments in this financial year. [62681]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I have made no such estimate because local authorities are not due to submit reports for this financial year until 31 October 1999. However, I expect all authorities to do everything possible to achieve the specified financial objective for the work which they carry out.

I have asked those authorities whose direct service organisations made losses for the 1997–98 financial year to report to me on what action they are taking to return their organisations to profit. I shall consider whether any further action is necessary when I have received these reports.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Performance League Tables

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research he has commissioned on value-added models of performance league tables. [62583]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Following research sponsored by the School Curriculum and Assessment Authority, and a consultation by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, we have conducted a value added pilot study, the results of which were published as a supplement to the secondary school tables on 1 December. The study involved some 200 schools and investigated a variety of options for presenting value added measures from Key Stage 3 to GCSE/GNVQ, based on information about individual pupil performance. A copy has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to publish league tables weighted according to pupil performance at Key Stage Two. [62582]

Mr. Charles Clarke: We aim to publish measures of value added by secondary schools from Key Stage 2 to the end of compulsory schooling from 2003, when suitable data for matching pupils' achievements over time are expected to become available.

Further Education

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the total amount the further education sector is expected to raise in efficiency savings in *(a)* 1998–99 and *(b)* 1999–2000; and if these sums are included in the announced increases in resources allocated to further education in each of those years. [62548]

Mr. Mudie: The efficiency savings expected of the Further Education sector are equivalent to £135 million in financial year 1998–99 and £35 million in financial year 1999–2000. The increased funding that has been allocated to Further Education in each of these years does not include these amounts but does assume that these efficiency savings will be realised.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if his figures for the additional students expected in the further education sector by 2002 will be calculated on the basis of student enrolments. [62547]

Mr. Mudie: The additional students expected in the further education sector by 2002 are calculated on the basis of the number of students in Further Education colleges.

Class Sizes

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if infant schools which continue to operate admission limits in excess of 30 or multiples of 30 will receive additional resources to meet the class-size pledge. [62608]

Ms Estelle Morris: Whether individual schools receive additional resources to meet the class size pledge will depend on the implementation plan submitted by their local education authority and the costings to support that plan, as approved by the Secretary of State. A school that continues to operate admission limits in excess of 30 or multiples of 30 may receive additional resources to meet the class size pledge if it is judged reasonable for it to continue to operate those limits in the context of the authority's plan, taking into account the circumstances of the school.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps he has taken to ensure the education in subsequent years of an exempted pupil admitted as a 31st child consistent with the class size requirements of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998. [62606]

Ms Estelle Morris: An excepted pupil falling within paragraphs 2 to 5 of the Schedule in the Education (Infant Class Sizes)(England) Regulations 1998 (S.I. 1998/1973) will cease to be treated as such a pupil after the end of the school year in which he/she is admitted to the school. This does not apply to an excepted pupil falling within paragraphs 6 and 7 of that Schedule because that exception permits a pupil with special educational needs, normally educated in a special school or a special unit attached to a mainstream school, to gain the benefits of being able to join in a mainstream class for some lessons.

Every governing body and local education authority will be under a legal duty to comply with class size legislation. We will be monitoring closely all aspects of that legislation, including the operation of the limit.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if, where an exempted pupil is admitted to an infant class in excess of 30, additional resources will be made available from his Department to meet the class size pledge in subsequent years. [62607]

Ms Estelle Morris: We will be providing sufficient resources to enable all local authorities to meet the class size pledge. We intend to make resources available to deal with contingencies which arise when, exceptionally, a child is lawfully admitted to a school, taking an infant

class above 30 pupils. Whether an authority will require additional resources to deal with a case of that kind will clearly depend on the particular circumstances of the case.

Higher Education (Fees)

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what advice his Department has issued to Higher Education institutions regarding the collection of fees from *(a)* EU and *(b)* UK students. [62603]

Mr. Mudie: Our advice did not differentiate between UK and non-UK EU students. My Department wrote to universities and colleges on 7 October 1998 in response to reports that some institutions were pressing for payment of the full £1,000 from students still awaiting an awards letter. It reiterated the advice contained in an earlier letter from the Department of 18 November 1997 about the importance of institutions undertaking the collection of the fee sensitively and flexibly in the early months of a degree course, taking account of the particular circumstances of individual students. It went on to advise that, in the case of students still awaiting an awards letter, and if instalment or other arrangements were offered, these should be put into effect only when the awards letter became available, so that payments were based on actual amounts due and students not required to make any contribution were not disadvantaged.

Dental Students

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what studies his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on (i) the effect of debt among dental students and (ii) the impact of this on their willingness to work in the NHS; [62315]

(2) what assessment he has made of the British Dental Association's survey of dental students' debt. [62313]

Mr. Mudie: The Department has not commissioned any research on the effect of debt on dental students but, we have recently received a summary of the survey by the British Dental Association which we shall consider carefully.

Mrs. Brinton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will provide extra help for dental students who are heavily in debt. [62314]

Mr. Mudie: Dental and other students who entered higher education before 1998–99 and who take out five or more loans will repay these loans over a period of seven years compared with five years for other borrowers. They will not have to start repaying their student loans until their income reaches the earnings related threshold which for 1998–99 is set at £17,784 per annum.

From 1998–99 dental students in the first four years of their course will have access to the same loan, grant and fees support as all other new entrants, but they will receive help in years five and beyond through NHS bursaries and the Department of Health will meet their tuition fees. After graduation, they will benefit from the fairer repayment system which we are introducing, which links repayments directly to graduates income. No repayments are made until their income reaches a threshold, initially set at £10,000, and thereafter they are calculated as a percentage of income above that level. This will ensure that dental students, and others with larger loans to repay will have affordable repayments linked directly to their earnings.

PE Teachers (Gloucestershire)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many secondary school physical education teachers have been employed by local education authority and grant maintained schools in Gloucestershire since 1979. [62973]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is not available.

School Performance Bonus Scheme

Mr. Hope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his oral statement of 3 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1041–45, if he will make a statement on the intended scope of the school performance bonus scheme. [63334]

Mr. Blunkett: Initial plans are that the School Performance Awards Scheme will cover up to a third of schools. Over time we would expect many more schools to be able to benefit. All payments would be allocated on the basis of merit. I will consult further on the technical document planned for publication in the New Year.

Teachers (Supergrades)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the extent to which the recently announced supergrades for teachers will be filled by existing teachers. [62908]

Mr. Charles Clarke: All Advanced Skills Teacher posts will be filled by serving teachers, because candidates need to be assessed in their present teaching posts. Advanced Skills Teacher posts may be filled by internal candidates, or by external candidates further to advertisement of posts. Both routes are lawful, although my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State would prefer Advanced Skills Teacher posts to be advertised in order to maximise the field of candidates.

Literacy and Numeracy

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what additional funding is available to schools to support the literacy and numeracy hours. [62347]

Ms Estelle Morris: We are providing significant investment to support the implementation of the National Literacy and Numeracy Strategies in primary schools. This year we have given £65 million to schools to purchase books for reading. On 7 December we announced an additional £54 million to support our drive to raise literacy standards in primary schools, a similar amount will be made available for schools to implement the numeracy hour in September 1999.

Dyslexia

Mr. Ridney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what evaluation he has made of the studies referred to in the Green Paper, "Excellence for all Children: Meeting Special Educational Needs", by the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre and the Manchester

Metropolitan University relating to teaching methods for tackling dyslexia; and if he intends to publish the evaluations. [62312]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The results of the Helen Arkell Dyslexia Centre research project, which has just been completed, will be published in the Department's research report series in February 1999. The results from the Manchester Metropolitan University research project are being published by the University. As a result of their research the Manchester Metropolitan University has been contracted to produce a video, teacher's handbook and other materials to support the teaching of pupils with mild to moderate literacy difficulties in mainstream schools. A copy of the video and materials will be sent to the Literacy Consultant(s) in each Local Education Authority. Summaries of both research projects will be in the Department's research brief series which appears on the Internet and Intranet.

Further and Higher Education

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will give details of the Government's plans to monitor the impact of the new funding system on recruitment to higher education institutions of various categories of student, including mature students. [61932]

Mr. Mudie: Initial evidence shows that there is a small increase in the number of school and college leavers accepted for higher education, and that there is almost no change in the social composition of accepted applicants.

My Department has in place a programme of evaluation work to assess the impact of the new funding arrangements on participation in higher education by different types of student, examining for instance the social background, ethnic group, disability, age and gender of students. This work will draw on data produced by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) and subsequently in the first half of next year by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). In addition we are commissioning an update of the Student Income and Expenditure Survey which will provide information about the impact of the new arrangements on student finances.

The key results of our monitoring and research will be published and available to Parliament.

Social Affairs Council

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Social Affairs Council held in Brussels on 1 and 2 December; and if he will make a statement. [62704]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I attended the first session of the Social Affairs Council and I attended the joint meeting of Social Affairs Ministers and Economic and Finance Ministers, both on 1 December 1998. My hon. Friend the Minister of State at the Department of Trade and Industry and I attended the second session of the Social Affairs Council on 2 December.

The first session of the Social Affairs Council discussed and agreed proposals for revisions to the Employment Guidelines for 1999 and the Joint Report on Implementation of the 1998 Guidelines. The joint meeting of Social Affairs Ministers and Economic and Finance Ministers adopted the Employment Guidelines for 1999 and the Joint Report on Implementation of the 1998 Guidelines, and both will now be submitted to the Vienna European Council on 11–12 December to be endorsed. The joint meeting also heard a presentation from Sir Brian Unwin, Chairman of the European Investment Bank, on the progress in implementing the programme agreed at the Luxembourg Jobs Summit for increased lending by the Bank to promote employment.

The second session of the Social Affairs Council on 2 December reached political agreement on a common position on the second amendment to the Carcinogens Directive and political agreement on a common position on a proposed Directive on Potentially Explosive Atmospheres.

The Council reached political agreement on the amendment to Regulation 1408/71 (social security for migrant workers) to extend certain elements to students.

The Council reached political agreement on the second reading of a Decision to encourage mobility between Member States for people in work-linked vocational training (Europass).

The Council was unable to reach agreement on the Worker Participation Directive element of the European Company Statute package.

The Council discussed a Presidency report on the follow up to the 1995 Beijing Women's Conference. The Council noted and endorsed the Commission's mid-term report on safety, hygiene and health at work. The Presidency reported on the November Social Dialogue Conference in Vienna. The Commission reported, without endorsement, on its three recent initiatives: on information and consultation of workers, where the social partners had failed to reach agreement; on a proposed extension of the Working Time Directive to excluded sectors; and on its Communication on work organisation.

European Union (Promotional Literature)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money the European Union is spending in the current year on providing literature about the EU in schools in the United Kingdom; and if he will make a statement. [62414]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* I understand that money from a number of sources may be used by the European Commission for this purpose. According to the Commission's Representation in the UK, I understand that, while the Commission can identify the cost of some specific publications intended for distribution to UK schools, it cannot provide a global figure.

Special Educational Needs

Ms Christine Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the 1997–98 annual report from the President of the SEN Tribunal will be published; and if he will make a statement. [63431]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The report has been published today, and copies have been placed in the Library.

The Tribunal provides a valuable and independent mechanism for considering parents' appeals against decisions of local education authorities. It is of credit to all those working with the Tribunal—the President, the members, and the secretariat staff—that the Tribunal has maintained its targets for dealing with appeals, in spite of the increased volume of such appeals. The Tribunal has earned a much deserved reputation for fairness and impartiality and for ensuring that its hearings are as informal as possible.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Livestock (Assessment and Classification)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what criteria are used *(a)* to measure the performance of British livestock and *(b)* to classify carcases of livestock. [63140]

Mr. Rooker: For livestock animals, the performance criteria used are growth rate, feed efficiency and reproductive rate. For carcases, the performance criteria used are conformation, fat cover and the finished weight of the carcase.

Pig Industry

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans the Government have to give financial assistance to pig producers. [62321]

Mr. Rooker: The EU pigmeat regime is very light and contains no provision for direct aids to producers of the sort introduced for beef and sheep farmers. Paying these as a state aid would contravene European law. Moreover, we generally oppose state aid schemes in the pig sector because they can distort trade, interfere with the market and risk prolonging a crisis.

The pig sector is benefiting from a number of market related measures which has been agreed within the EU and supported by the Government. These have been worth almost £100 million in market support across the EU this year. Measures include the re-introduction of refunds on exports of fresh and frozen carcases and cuts of pigmeat; two further increases in those refunds—including a 75 per cent. increase on exports to Russia; and the introduction of an aids to private storage scheme.

The Government continue to fund strategic R&D of assistance to the pig industry to the tune of £2.5 million per annum. An increasing proportion of this spend is on joint projects with the industry, a clear sign that the work we are funding is of value.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the British pig industry; and what plans he has to assist pig farmers to increase their trade within the European Union. [62322]

Mr. Rooker: Like their counterparts in the rest of the EU, the British pig industry is going through a difficult time at present, with market prices well below the cost of production. The crisis is due mainly to over-production, because of an exaggerated producer response to the BSE crisis and to a reduction in supply due to outbreaks of classical swine fever (CSF) on mainland Europe, principally in the Netherlands. This has led to a distorted version of the classic pig cycle, with the position being exacerbated by the strong pound, high production in the USA and a reduction in world demand, e.g. in Russia and the Far East.

The Meat and Livestock Commission (MLC) and Food from Britain have helped the British pig industry to establish a healthy export trade in pork and pork products with other EU countries. In 1997, over 200,000 tonnes were exported to the EU (up some 20 per cent. on 1996) and this figure is likely to be exceeded in 1998.

For their part, Government Ministers have directed their efforts at raising the profile of British pigmeat in the domestic market, particularly the catering market. We have spearheaded a campaign aimed at the catering and food service sector with the objective of increasing the use of pigmeat products in a sector which takes 30 per cent. of the pigmeat market.

In addition, the major retailers have given voluntary undertakings that all their own-label fresh pork, bacon, ham, sausages and pork pies will come from stall and tether and MBM free systems. In addition, they will not sell imported fresh pork processed or packaged in the UK, under a British label. These are major advances which will be welcomed by the British pig industry.

Bovine Tuberculosis

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the degree of certainty about the link between the incidence of tuberculosis in cattle and the presence locally of badgers; and if he will make a statement. [62909]

Mr. Rooker: The Krebs report concluded that the sum of evidence strongly supports the view that in Britain badgers are a significant source of TB infection in cattle.

Aromatherapy Oils

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if aromatherapy oils are classified as agricultural products. [63048]

Mr. Rooker: Aromatherapy oils would not normally be classified as agricultural products but if the hon. Member writes to me with specific details about the products she is concerned with I will try to provide a more definitive answer.

Abattoirs

Mrs. Fiona Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to introduce maximum line speeds in abattoirs. [62784]

Mr. Rooker: GB meat hygiene legislation provides the Meat Hygiene Service with powers to require the slowing of line speeds in individual abattoirs where, in the opinion of the Official Veterinary Surgeon, line speeds are such as to jeopardise the satisfactory inspection or the hygienic production of meat. I have no plans, however, for the blanket introduction of maximum line speeds in licensed abattoirs.

Calf Processing Scheme

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the proposed restoration of grant aid for the calf processing scheme. [63128]

Mr. Rooker: I refer the hon. Member to the statement given by my right hon. Friend the Minister to the House on 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 624–26. The new rate of aid of £55.85 per calf came into force on 7 December.

Milk Prices

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that reductions in prices paid to milk producers are passed on to milk consumers. [63127]

Mr. Rooker: Pricing decisions at retail level in respect of produce, including milk, are matters for the commercial judgment of the various food retail companies, which operate in a fiercely competitive market. However, it must be remembered that a significant part of the final price of food to the consumer is accounted for by processing, distribution and marketing costs. So the proportional impact of raw material price changes would be expected to be much reduced at retail level.

Fallen Stock (Disposal)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to make an announcement of future arrangements for the disposal of fallen stock. [63139]

Mr. Rooker: The Government consider that it is the responsibility of the livestock industry to arrange for the disposal of its waste, including fallen stock.

BSE Inquiry

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the total cost of the current BSE inquiry; and how many staff have been allocated to it. [62950]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The estimated direct cost of the BSE Inquiry is £10 million, excluding departmental costs and legal support for departmental witnesses. The number of staff allocated to the Inquiry has fluctuated according to need; it currently stands at 85.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 10 December 1998

SOCIAL SECURITY

Korean War Veterans

Mr. Pond: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the incidence of rheumatoid arthritis is amongst veterans of the Korean War; and how this compares with the incidence amongst the population as a whole. [62977]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available.

Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the programmes which it will be ultra vires for his Department to fund or have sole responsibility for after devolution; if he will list these programmes; and if he will make a statement. [63298]

Mr. Timms: Social Security, Child Support and pension matters are reserved to the Westminster Parliament by virtue of Head F of Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security will therefore remain responsible for these matters in Scotland after devolution.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much is spent annually by his Department on research programmes in Scotland; and what proportion of this funding will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament after devolution. [63296]

Mr. Timms: Social Security, Child Support and Pensions are reserved matters, and the research associated with them will also remain this Department's responsibility after devolution. Therefore none of the funding attributable to research in this Department will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament.

The cost of collecting data in relation to Scotland is an integral part of the cost of collecting data for Great Britain. The overhead costs of conducting the research are incurred on a Great Britain basis. It is not therefore possible to disaggregate the spending on research in Scotland from the total spending in Great Britain.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* by programme over £50,000 and *(b)* the total of spending by his Department in Scotland on the identifiable spending areas detailed in Table 7.6A of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 1997–98 (Cmnd 3601); which of these programmes will fall solely or jointly under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament; and what arrangements are in place to transfer control of funds for these projects to the Scottish Executive or Parliament. [63297]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the hon. Member for Tayside, North (Mr. Swinney) on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *615*, which sets out identifiable expenditure on Social Security benefits in Scotland. It does not include the costs of administration in or in respect of Scotland, or certain elements, e.g. benefits paid overseas which cannot be attributed separately.

Social Security is a reserved matter and expenditure on it will not therefore be the responsibility of the Scottish Executive or Parliament.

Supported Accommodation

Ms Stuart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will make a statement about the future of the funding arrangements for supported accommodation. [63667]

Mr. Darling: We are publishing today a consultation document "Supporting People" proposing new funding arrangements for support services. The proposals arise from the Inter-Departmental review of funding for supported accommodation.

Over the years Housing Benefit, which was designed to meet housing costs, has been used to meet other costs over which the Government have no control. As a result, Housing Benefit became the primary funding stream for support services that varied in standard from the very good to the very bad. There was no proper consideration of quality or standards.

Nor has there been an effective over-arching strategy of the work of the various government departments involved, or ownership of responsibility for ensuring that vulnerable people receive the support they require. This has resulted in a focus on dealing with problems once they emerge, sometimes pushing people into more acute services than they might have originally needed.

The new arrangements will enable many thousands of vulnerable people to get the cost-effective and high-quality services which they need.

We propose to replace the current complicated arrangements with one single budget targeted specifically at support services. This will ensure that the Government meet people's basic housing costs and at the same time that vulnerable people get the quality help they need to meet their requirements. This will be administered at the local level by Local Authorities. The new single budget will be preceded by a new, time-limited, transitional Housing Benefit scheme which will be implemented when current regulations expire; these regulations were introduced to protect many thousands of vulnerable people whose support services were jeopardised by a Court ruling in July 1997.

Our new proposals for delivering support to vulnerable people will operate in combination with community care, housing, and other existing policies to support vulnerable people in the community. Funding for support services will, for the first time, be clear and practical. This means that many vulnerable people—such as frail elderly people, people with mental health problems, and victims of domestic violence—will be able to remain independent within the community.

The proposals demonstrate the benefits of Inter-Departmental working, bringing together expertise across Government to develop policies that meet the needs of individuals. In carrying this work forward, the Government are keen to involve local government, the Housing Corporation, the providers and other stakeholders throughout the consultation process and beyond.

Copies will be placed in the Library.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much is spent annually by his Department on research programmes in Scotland; and what proportion of this funding will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament after devolution. [63287]

Mr. Chris Smith: Nil.

Television Education Channel

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment over the establishment of a new television education channel. [63316]

Mr. Chris Smith: My Department is in regular contact with the Department for Education and Employment on a wide range of issues including broadcast educational material, and the Department for Education and Employment is discussing direct with broadcasters the development and broadcast of new specific digital educational services to support the GCSE National Curriculum.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will write in response to the questions tabled on 4 November by the hon. Member for East Surrey. [63325]

Mr. Chris Smith: I replied to the hon. Member in a letter dated 30 November and delivered to the House on 4 December 1998.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what is his e-mail address. [62560]

Mr. Hoon: Hon. Members can e-mail the Lord Chancellor's Department's Ministerial Correspondence Unit at: *mcu.lcd@gtnet.gov.uk*. Members of the public can e-mail the Department at: *enquiries.lcdhq@gtnet.gov.uk*.

Maintenance Orders

Mr. Truswell: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of reciprocal enforcement of maintenance orders; and if he will make a statement. [62357]

Mr. Hoon: Officials from my Department frequently review the effectiveness of internal procedures for transmitting applications for the enforcement of maintenance orders between the UK and overseas authorities to discuss improvements to these reciprocal arrangements.

Environmental Courts

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will establish designated courts to deal with environmental issues. [62537]

Mr. Hoon: There are no plans to establish separate environmental courts. However, cases involving environmental issues will benefit, along with all other cases, from the regime of judicial case management to be introduced in April.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Road Traffic Law

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made over the last five years *(a)* within his Department, *(b)* in conjunction with other Government departments and *(c)* in conjunction with European bodies towards developing systems involving the use of new technology for safety-related road traffic law enforcement and the administration of penalties. [62544]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Road traffic law enforcement and the administration of penalties are mainly matters for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. However, my department, in conjunction with his, is interested in the potential of new technology to support its road safety and environmental objectives. To that end it has an extensive research programme and is also supportive of a wide range of research in the UK and in Europe which seeks to develop practical applications of new technology for road traffic law enforcement and the administration of penalties. Examples of this are the research projects on vehicle speed control being conducted on behalf of the Department by the Motor Industry Research Association and the Institute for Transport Studies at the University of Leeds, and the field trials conducted in Sweden and the Netherlands evaluating different systems and technologies to control vehicle speeds externally.

Donaldson Report

Mr. Ainger: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to publish Lord Donaldson's report on command and control of major pollution incidents; and if he will make a statement. [62937]

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the report by Lord Donaldson relating to the 'Sea Empress' incident will be published. [63044]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We received Lord Donaldson's report on his review of marine salvage and intervention and their command and control on 20 November. Consideration is being given to the publication of the report.

Housing Benefits

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how much housing benefit was paid to council tenants *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* of Portsmouth City Council in each of the last three years; and in each case, what proportion of that amount was funded from council rents. [63026]

Mr. Raynsford: The information requested is shown in the following table.

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
UK			
HB paid to council tenants (£ million)	4,421	4,535	4,441
Percentage funded through rental surpluses	23.7	25.9	27.4
Portsmouth			
HB paid to council tenants (£ million)	25.0	26.6	26.5
Percentage funded through rental surpluses	16.0	18.3	19.3

Housing Development (North-West)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the percentage and area of brownfield sites in the North West where the cost of reclamation is likely to make the site uneconomic for housing development. [63047]

Mr. Raynsford: The information requested is not currently available. Phase 1 of the National Land Use Database project, which we launched in May 1998, covers vacant and derelict sites and other previously developed land which may be available for redevelopment. Officials are currently working with English Partnerships, local authorities and the Ordnance Survey to collect the information for this first phase. Initial results should be available by the end of March 1999.

Railtrack

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the levels of capital investment by Railtrack for each year since it was established; what the figures were for comparable capital investment by British Rail in the five years before privatisation; and if he will make a statement. [62600]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Railtrack was established on 1 April 1994 and privatised on 20 May 1996. The table shows annual total rail infrastructure investment between 1989–90 and 1997–98.

Year	*Annual total rail infrastructure investment (£ million cash)*
1989–90	[1]603
1990–91	625
1991–92	769
1992–93	843
1993–94	708
1994–95	[2]661
1995–96	744
1996–97	961
1997–98	1,250

[1] Investment figures for 1989–90 to 1993–94 cover BR investment on infrastructure, on buildings, and on new routes and new electrification. This approximates, but is not identical to, the types of investment now undertaken by Railtrack.

[2] In addition, investment figures from 1994–95 onwards, based on information provided by Railtrack and as reported in the company's Annual Reports and Accounts, are not directly comparable with figures for rail infrastructure investment in previous years due to changes in accounting definitions and the adoption of a new accounting practice by Railtrack.

Seat Belts and Child Restraints

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what steps he is taking to encourage motorists to use appropriate safety measures for child passengers; [62933]

(2) what plans he has to encourage motorists *(a)* to use seat belts and *(b)* to ensure that their passengers wear seat belts. [62984]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department's leaflet "Seat Belts and Child Restraints" which provides advice on the law, on selecting the right child restraint and on wearing by pregnant women is widely available. Advice is also provided in the 1996 version of the Department of Transport publication "Choosing Safety", published by the Stationery Office. Copies of both documents are in the Library of the House.

In the longer term, a standard method of attaching child restraints to cars will make fitting more straightforward. The UK has taken a leading role in the development of the ISOFIX system, which would provide standard attachment points on both child restraints and cars. We are keen for this system to be adopted as the European norm.

Following the successful campaign last July to encourage rear seat belt wearing we are considering further advertising in 1999. Surveys by the Transport Research Laboratory show an increase in rear seat belt wearing (children and adults) from 67 per cent. in April 1998 to 72 per cent. in October 1998, the highest figure yet reported by these regular surveys.

Great North Eastern Railway

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he is taking to encourage GNER to increase the speed and regularity of its services. [62983]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The franchise agreement, which governs the provision of services, includes a Passenger Service Requirement (PSR) which specifies a minimum level of service which GNER must plan to provide. The PSR includes maximum acceptable intervals between services and maximum acceptable end-to-end journey

times. What services operate over and above the PSR is a matter for GNER. Ministers are considering recommendations from the Franchising Director about the future provision of capacity for East Coast Main Line services, and will make a statement about that in due course.

School Playing Fields (Redevelopment)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what monitoring his Department has carried out regarding redevelopments of school playing fields called in under the statutory consultee process. [62972]

Mr. Raynsford: Planning applications to develop school playing fields which are called in for the Secretary of State's determination are handled in the first instance by the Government Offices for the Regions. Four applications have been called in since June 1997.

Waste Transportation

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of *(a)* road, *(b)* rail and *(c)* water traffic can be attributed to the transportation of waste; and if he will make a statement. [62428]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* Waste accounted for some 7 per cent. of the total tonnage of domestic waterborne freight in 1997. No information is currently available for the percentage of road and rail traffic accounted for by waste. This limited information will be taken into account in the follow up to the Department's consultation paper "Less Waste, More Value".

Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) how much is spent annually by his Department on research programmes in Scotland; and what proportion of this funding will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament after devolution; [63278]

(2) if he will list *(a)* by programme over £50,000 and *(b)* the total spending by his Department in Scotland on the identifiable spending areas detailed in Table 7.6A of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 1997–98 (Cmnd 3601); which of these programmes will fall solely or jointly under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament; and what arrangements are in place to transfer control of funds for these projects to the Scottish Executive or Parliament; [63279]

(3) what assessment he has made of the programmes which it will be ultra vires his Department to fund or have sole responsibility for after devolution; if he will list these programmes; and if he will make a statement. [63280]

Mr. Meale: Under the terms of the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish Ministers will assume responsibility for a range of devolved functions which will in part depend on secondary legislation which has yet to be passed. My Department is reviewing its programmes, including the research components, in the light of the Scotland Act. It is too early to say to what extent programme expenditure which is currently administered by the Department may relate to functions which will transfer to Scottish Ministers. Work is taking place to establish the extent of any such expenditure and to assess the needs for any consequential transfer of funds to the Scottish Ministers. For the total spending by the Department in Scotland I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *615*.

Pesticide Tax

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the *(a)* environmental benefits and *(b)* costs to rural businesses of a pesticide tax. [63450]

Mr. Meale: The Department has commissioned extensive research work on the feasibility of an economic instrument to assist in delivering the Government's pesticide minimisation policy. This has included assessment of the potential environmental benefits of such an instrument, of the impacts on and costs to relevant agricultural sectors and on the manufacturers and distributors of pesticides.

Greater London Authority Bill

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to publish the explanatory notes to the Greater London Authority Bill. [63305]

Mr. Raynsford: Copies of the Explanatory note were published today.

Sea Stores, Yate

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what current use is made of the sea stores property at Yate, owned by the Property Services Agency; and what plans he has for its future use. [63256]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This property is in fact owned by the Highways Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from H. Parker-Brown to Mr. Steve Webb, dated 10 December 1998:

The Transport Minister, Glenda Jackson, has asked Lawrie Haynes, the Chief Executive, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about the sea stores at Yate. I am replying in Lawrie's absence from the office.

The stores are owned by the Highways Agency and are used to store mainly electrical equipment needed for the National Motorway Communications Network. There are no plans to change this use.

UK Safety Oversight System

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to announce the results of the audit of the UK safety oversight system carried out by the International Civil Aviation Safety Organisation in April 1998; and if he will make a statement. [63665]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The United Kingdom was one of the leading nations in pressing the International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) to set up, in 1995, a

programme of voluntary safety assessments of its member states. The objective of this programme was to seek to ensure that ICAO Contracting States are adequately discharging their responsibilities for safety oversight in certain specific areas: aircraft operations, the licensing and training of personnel and aircraft airworthiness.

This Government took the initiative in December 1997—the first major aviation state to do so—of asking ICAO to assess the UK safety oversight system. The audit took place from 14–24 April, this year, and focused to a large extent on the role of the Civil Aviation Authority. The final Report, which was agreed with ICAO on 30 October, finds that the

'CAA is an appropriately organised and funded organisation ... very effective and efficient for its purpose'.

There are 28 recommendations, relatively few compared with audits of other, smaller authorities, and none questions the performance of the Authority's fundamental safety work. The Government have accepted all but two of the recommendations, which could not have been met within the current legislative structure. We have agreed an Action Plan, drawn up by the CAA, to meet the recommendations; the Plan is included in the Report.

We have also been firm advocates of the need to make the results of ICAO audits more transparent and widely available to the international aviation community and to the public at large. Today, we are happy to make the full ICAO report available on the Internet at the DETR web-site. Printed copies have been placed in the House Libraries.

The UK is one of the leaders in safety oversight, with an excellent reputation world wide. But aviation safety needs constant vigilance; that is why both the Government and the Authority were keen to open its doors to ICAO. The Government welcome the audit results and the CAA's positive response, and will be following closely the implementation of the Action Plan. I am confident that the CAA, and the UK aviation industry as a whole, has benefited from this audit.

Roads Review

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress since the Roads Review on the Targeted Programme of Improvements and the programme studies. [63666]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My noble Friend the Minister for Roads and Road Safety announced today that we are able to provide further details of the construction programme for the schemes included in our Targeted Programme of Improvements listed in *A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England*.

As previously stated by my right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport, on 31 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 653–75, all the schemes listed in the TPI will definitely start within the next seven years, subject only to the completion of any outstanding statutory procedures.

For those schemes where all the statutory procedures have been completed, the following are the planned start of works dates. Final confirmation of individual start dates within each year will be subject to the satisfactory completion of the necessary contract process.

2000–01

A1: Willowburn—Denwick

A6: Great Glen Bypass

A27: Polegate Bypass

A41: Aston Clinton Bypass

A43: Silverstone Bypass

A43: Whitfield Turn—Brackley Hatch Improvement

A1033: Hedon Road, Hull Improvement

2001–02

A5: Nesscliffe Bypass

A6: Clapham Bypass

A6: Rothwell—Desborough Bypass

A6: Rushden and Higham Ferrers Bypass

A10: Wadesmill-Colliers End Bypass

A11: Roudham Heath to Attleborough

A21: Lamberhurst Bypass

A23: Coulsdon Relief Road

A43: M40-B4031 Improvement

A46: Newark-Lincoln Improvement

A63: Selby Bypass

A66: Stainburn and Great Clifton Bypass

A120: Stansted-Braintree

A500: Basford/Hough/Shavington Bypass

A650: Bingley Relief Road

2002–03

M25: J 12–15 Widening

2003–04

M60: J 5–8 (formerly M63 J 6–9 Widening).

We propose to take forward the following five schemes under Design, Build, Finance and Operate (DBFO) contracts. These provide bidders with the flexibility to decide their own start dates as a means of producing better value for money. In line with our new objectives for Trunk Roads the proposed payment mechanisms for these schemes will incentivise efficient road operation and will include rewarding improved safety and good service to buses and lorries. We will further keep under review the scope for additional public private partnerships to implement the TPI.

The DBFO Schemes are:

Contract Award Date

2002–03

A1(M): Ferrybridge to Hook Moor

A1(M): Wetherby to Walshford.

The following three schemes, which we propose taking forward under DBFO contracts, are still subject to statutory procedures. The next statutory procedures for these schemes, together with the planned dates, are:

1999–2000

A249: Iwade-Queenborough Improvement (Public Inquiry)

2000–01

A2: Bean-Cobham Widening Phase 2 (Public Consultation)

A2: A2/A282 Dartford Improvement (Order Publication).

I am not yet in a position to announce the final start of works dates for the remaining schemes listed in the TPI. I am however able to announce the next statutory procedure for the remaining schemes where applicable.

1998–99

A303: Stonehenge (Public Consultation)

1999–2000

A6: Alvaston (Order Publication)

A34: Chieveley/M4 J 13 Improvement (Order Publication—revised CPO)

2000–01

A2: Bean-Cobham Widening Phase 1 (Public Consultation)

A500: City Road/Stoke Road Junctions (Order Publication)

2001–02

A5: Weeford-Fazeley Improvement (Order Publication)

A14: Rookery Crossroads Grade Separated Junction (Order Publication)

A421: Great Barford Bypass (Order Publication).

At the same time as the TPI was published, a further seven schemes were listed which were not sufficiently advanced to be considered for the TPI but which are to be progressed through their statutory procedures and, if endorsed as a result of the Regional Planning Guidance procedure process, will be taken forward without delay, subject only to the availability of funds. They are, with dates of the next statutory procedure:

1999–2000

A30: Bodmin-Indian Queens Improvement (Public Consultation)

2000–01

A11: Attleborough Bypass (Public Consultation)

A11: Fiveways-Thetford Improvement (Public Consultation)

A63: Melton Grade Separated Junction (Order Publication)

2001–02

A45/A46: Tollbar End Improvement (Public Consultation)

A57/A628: Mottram-Tintwistle Bypass (Order Publication)

A66: Temple Sowerby Bypass and Improvement at Winderwath (Order Publication).

In *A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England* we also proposed a programme of studies to address the most urgent problems on the Trunk Road Network not addressed by schemes in the TPI. My Department is today beginning a consultation exercise with Regional Planning Bodies to agree the study programme and to seek views in particular on the timing of the studies. The provisional programme of studies is as follows:

Tranche one multi-modal studies: West Midlands to North West Conurbation; London Orbital; South West Yorkshire Motorway box; Tyneside; West Midlands Area; Access to Hastings; London to South West and South Wales; North-South Movements in East Midlands; and South East Manchester.

Work to begin in spring 1999.

Tranche two multi-modal studies: Cambridge to Huntingdon, A453 (M1-Nottingham); Southampton to Folkestone; Hull; London to South Midlands; West Midlands to Nottingham; London to Reading.

The start date for these studies will depend on the progress of tranche one studies in each region.

Roads-based studies: A1 Bramham to Barton; Norwich to Great Yarmouth; A5 Shrewsbury to Welsh Border; A38 Derby Junctions; M1 Junction 19; A3 Hindhead; Deeside Park Junctions; M40/A46 Longbridge roundabout; A419 Blunsdon; A66 Safety study.

We intend to begin these within the next two years.

A copy of the consultation document will be placed in the Library.

Right to Buy

Ms Blears: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will announce the results of the consultation exercise on the changes to the right to buy maximum discount. [63772]

Mr. Fitzpatrick: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will announce the results of the consultation exercise on the changes to the right to buy maximum discount. [63807]

Ms Armstrong: We intend the Right to Buy scheme to continue, and that eligible tenants should continue to buy at substantial discounts. The annual cost of the scheme to the taxpayer is currently around £400 million a year at net present value. Tenants are, and will continue to be, eligible to claim up to 60 per cent. discount on a house and 70 per cent. discount on a flat, but we want to provide value for money to the taxpayer so the maximum cash limit of £50,000 will be reduced.

We announced plans on 28 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *124–25*, to reduce the limit to a fairer level which reflected more closely the actual cost of buying a local authority home in each of the nine English regions. The consultation period ended on 30 September. We had 197 responses. The great majority of these welcomed the proposal to reduce the level of discount.

Today the Housing (Right to Buy) (Maximum Discount) Order 1998, SI 1998 2997 has been laid before Parliament for approval.

Subject to Parliamentary approval, the change will come into force on 11 February 1999. For anyone applying to buy on or after that date, the maximum cash limits on discounts available under the Right to Buy, the preserved Right to Buy and voluntary sales of council housing will range from £38,000 in London and the South East to £22,000 in the North East.

The limits are based on 70 per cent. of the average value of local authority houses and flats in each region, and 65 per cent. in London where pressure on social housing is currently greatest.

The Right to Buy scheme was reviewed as part of the Housing Comprehensive Spending Review. We are strongly committed to promoting sustainable home ownership so the Right to Buy scheme will still provide tenants with the opportunity to buy at generous discounts.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the President of the Council how many people in her Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if she will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62825]

Mrs. Beckett: None of the current staff of my department is on secondment from a private company.

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the President of the Council if she will list the special advisers in her Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62834]

Mrs. Beckett: The Special Advisers in my Department are Ms Sheila Watson and Ms Nicci Russell. They support me on the full range of issues for which I am responsible. It would be inappropriate to give details about their individual levels of security clearance.

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the President of the Council if she will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups her Office has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62807]

Mrs. Beckett: My department has no task forces, review panels, or advisory groups.

HEALTH

Ritalin

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will provide figures for the last five years relating to the prescribing on the NHS of the drug Ritalin to treat children with attention deficit disorder. [62975]

Mr. Milburn: The number of National Health Service prescription items dispensed in the community and the net ingredient cost for methylphenidate hydrochloride are given in the table. Information about prescriptions dispensed in hospitals are not available centrally.

Methylphenidate hydrochloride NHS prescription items and net ingredient cost dispensed in the community England 1993 to 1997

Year	Prescription items (thousands)	Net ingredient cost (£000)
1993	3.5	25.7
1994	6.0	52.3
1995	14.7	253.0
1996	47.7	811.7
1997	92.1	1,636.5

Notes:

1. The data are from the Prescription Cost Analysis system and cover all NHS prescriptions for methylphenidate hydrochloride dispensed by community pharmacists and dispensing doctors in England. Methylphenidate hydrochloride is the approved non-proprietary name for Ritalin.
2. The net ingredient cost (NIC) is the basic cost of a drug. This cost does not take account of discounts, dispensing costs, fees or prescription charges income.
3. Total NHS prescriptions include prescriptions originating not only from general practitioners but also from hospital doctors where these are dispensed in the community. Also included are prescriptions written in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the Isle of Man but dispensed in England.
4. It is assumed that the majority of prescriptions for methylphenidate hydrochloride relate to the treatment of children with attention deficit disorder, which is currently the only licensed indication of this drug. However, a small number of prescriptions may relate to the treatment of patients with narcolepsy (a licensed indication of the drug in the 1980s).

Operating Theatre Practitioners

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received concerning a compulsory registration system for operating theatre practitioners; and if he will make a statement. [62115]

Mr. Milburn *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* We have received a representation from the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland concerning a proposed compulsory registration system for operating theatre practitioners. The representation is now being considered.

Hospital Discharges

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Health which UK health authorities are meeting their target levels for the number of delayed discharges. [62976]

Mr. Milburn: There are no national targets levels for the number of delayed discharges for health authorities. Health authorities may set targets, but these are locally managed.

Established good practice in hospital discharge seeks to balance the needs and wishes of patients and their carers with the requirement to make the most effective use of available resources. It is in no-one's interest for patients to stay in hospital for longer than they need to and hospital discharge procedures need to be sensitive to individual needs. Delays in discharge can reflect a variety of factors and these will vary between health authorities, depending on a variety of factors.

Children's Homes (East Sussex)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many private sector children's homes in East Sussex have been visited by social services inspectors in the last six months. [63032]

Mr. Hutton: In the last six months East Sussex County Council Inspection Unit has visited the two private children's homes in East Sussex registered under the Children Act 1989.

Widowers' Pensions

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the cost of backdating the pension arrangements for widowers of female doctors so that they are in line with the pension arrangements for widows of male doctors. [62509]

Mr. Milburn: The capitalised cost of backdating widowers' pensions to 1972 based on 1994–95 salaries has been estimated at around £350 million.

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will amend the pension rights of the widowers of female doctors to make them equivalent to the pension arrangements made for widows of male doctors. [62510]

Mr. Milburn: The National Health Service pension scheme provides the widowers of female doctors with the same pension rights as widows of male doctors.

Harefield Hospital

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he met Professor Sir Magdi Yacoub to discuss the future of Harefield Hospital; and if he will make a statement. [63267]

Mr. Milburn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State met Professor Sir Magdi Yacoub on Tuesday 1 December 1998 to talk about services in West London

and the regulation of clinical perfusionists. The Department recognises and pays tribute to the work undertaken by Professor Sir Magdi Yacoub and his colleagues at Harefield Hospital. My right hon. Friend gave Sir Magdi his assurance of the Government's determination not to allow planning blight to set in while the longer term reconfiguration of services was considered. The consequences of any reconfiguration of services would be properly explored. Any service changes at Harefield Hospital will be subject to full public consultation.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter dated 2 November concerning constituents: reference POH(2)5608/16. [63177]

Mr. Milburn: I replied to my hon. Friend today.

Councillors

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will list the local authorities which have informed him about the number and percentage of men and women councillors; if he will give the number and percentage of men and women councillors in each case; and if he will list those local authorities which have not informed him. [63254]

Ms Jowell: Copies of the information requested have been placed in the Library.

DEFENCE

Service Women (Compensation)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the costs of compensating servicewomen who left the services as a consequence of pregnancy *(a)* in each year since 1990 and *(b)* in the coming financial year. [62180]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Compensation payments to Servicewomen who left the Armed Forces because of pregnancy began in August 1992. Payments followed applications to industrial tribunals after the High Court ruled that to discharge women from the Armed Forces on the grounds of pregnancy was in breach of the European Equal Treatment Directive. The following amounts in compensation were awarded in each of the financial years shown:

Financial Year	*Amount (£)*
1992–1993	1,653,931
1993–1994	6,980,274
1994–1995	35,611,282
1995–1996	11,762,089
1996–1997	2,803,571
1997–1998	948,572
1998–1999 (to 30 November 1998)	520,063

No further compensation will be paid in the remainder of 1998–1999 or in 1999–2000, as all claims have now been settled.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62842]

Mr. George Robertson: The two Special Advisers employed by my Department are Alasdair McGowan and Bernard Gray.

They advise me on the full range of issues for which I am responsible. They are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements.

Gulf War Veterans

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what information is made available to doctors treating Gulf War veterans in relation to any exposure they may have had to materials which may have been toxic or hazardous, with particular reference to depleted uranium. [63033]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Any Gulf veteran who is concerned that his or her health has been adversely affected by Service during the Gulf conflict, including possible exposure to depleted uranium (DU), is entitled to seek a referral to the MOD's Medical Assessment Programme (MAP) for a full medical assessment. During this assessment, MAP patients receive a standard set of tests and are asked by the examining MAP physician to provide detailed information about possible factors, including DU, to which they may have been exposed during the Gulf conflict. Following the assessment, the examining physician will write to the doctor who referred the patient to the programme, to provide diagnostic information and recommend any appropriate treatment. It is then that doctor's responsibility to take forward and monitor the treatment as he or she would for any other patient. For veterans who have left the Armed Forces, their doctor will normally be a GP and any recommended treatment will therefore be carried out within the NHS.

In consultation with the Department of Health and the health departments of the Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland Offices, the Ministry of Defence has produced an information pack with the intention of providing General Practitioners and other health professionals with information which they may find useful in dealing with Gulf veterans' health concerns. This pack includes summaries of what is known about a number of possible factors to which veterans may have been exposed during their service in the Gulf, including DU. It also includes an overview of research which has been carried out in areas related to Gulf veterans' illnesses, together with a bibliography of key papers. The information pack has been placed on the MOD's internet site and is available in hard copy on request. My Department is currently considering how best to ensure further than this information reaches its target audience. A copy of the pack has been placed in the Library of the House.

Scammel Commander Tank Transporters

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if Scammel Commander tank transporters loaded with Challenger I and Challenger II tanks meet the regulatory

requirements in *(a)* Holland and *(b)* Germany; how many infringements have been reported in 1998; and if he will make a statement. [62072]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* Formal clearance is sought from both the Dutch and German authorities when moving these vehicles along specified routes and at agreed times. There have been no infringements of the requirements.

Sennybridge Army Field Training Centre

Mr. Livsey: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the *(a)* chemicals used (i) for ground maintenance and (ii) in the training of troops in chemical warfare and *(b)* training activities that took place on each day between 1 and 9 September at Sennybridge Army Field Training Centre. [62654]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* A number of non-toxic chemicals are used at Sennybridge Army Field Training Centre (AFTC) for the purposes of ground maintenance and training troops in chemical defence.

The approved chemicals used for ground maintenance are ROUNDUP, GARALON, and occasionally ASULOX.

During exercises to train troops for defence against chemical warfare, white smoke, CS Gas (Orthoclorobenzlidenmalononitrile), Chemical Agent Training Mixture Polyethyleneglycol 300, and Amyl Acetate are used, the latter to prove respirators prior to use.

The Nuclear Biological and Chemical Battle Run, the area of Sennybridge Training Area used for training in chemical defence, was used by 3 Commando Brigade, the Royal Marines for training on 2, 3, 4, 5 and 8 September 1998. The remainder of the training centre was used for a number of infantry patrolling, live firing, and other tactical training exercises over the period in question.

Missiles (China)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the acquisition by China of land-mobile intercontinental ballistic missiles and long-range cruise missiles was taken into account in the Strategic Defence Review. [62921]

Mr. George Robertson: Yes. These issues were fully considered in the Strategic Defence Review (Cm 3999) published in July 1998.

Regiments and Bands

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which regiments will be available to participate in the ceremonies for the opening of the Scottish Parliament; and what plans he has to ensure prominence is given to Scottish regiments and bands based in Scotland in the procession and ceremonies. [63304]

Mr. George Robertson: Initial planning has only recently begun for the ceremonies to mark the opening of the Scottish Parliament and it is not yet possible to confirm which regiments will participate. However, the 1st Battalion The Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders and the 1st Battalion The Black Watch will be assigned to public duties in Scotland during the summer of 1999 and it is likely that the soldiers who take part in the opening ceremony will be drawn from these regiments. It is anticipated that music for the occasion will be provided by Scottish military bands.

Armed Forces Pay Review Body

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the terms of reference for the Armed Forces Pay Review Body. [63669]

Mr. George Robertson: The Terms of Reference for the Armed Forces Pay Review Body have been revised, as follows, to reflect the key considerations of the Comprehensive Spending Review White Paper.

The role of the Armed Forces Pay Review Body is to provide independent advice to the Prime Minister and the Secretary of State for Defence on the remuneration and charges for members of the Naval, Military and Air Forces of the Crown.

In reaching its recommendations, the Review Body is to have regard to the following considerations:

the need to recruit, retain and motivate suitably able and qualified people taking account of the particular circumstances of service life;

Government policies for improving the public services, including the requirement on the Ministry of Defence to meet the output targets for the delivery of departmental services;

the funds available to the Ministry of Defence as set out in the Government's departmental expenditure limits;

the Government's inflation target.

The Review Body shall have regard for the need for the pay of the Armed Forces to be broadly comparable with pay levels in civilian life.

The Review Body shall, in reaching its recommendations, take account of the evidence submitted to it by the Government and others. The Review Body may also consider other specific issues as the occasion arises.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Hinduja Group

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what grant applications his Department has received from the Hinduja group of companies since 1 May 1997; and what grants have been paid. [62239]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* We have no record of the Department receiving any application for grant from the Hinduja group.

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant [illegible] answer to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-A[illegible] (Mr. Maples) of 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *70–71*, for what reasons the Minister of State was required to return from Liverpool to London for an urgent meeting. [63308]

Mr. Mandelson: The Minister of State was required to attend an unscheduled meeting with the Prime Minister and the then President of the Board of Trade.

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the occasions since 1 May 1997 on which Ministers in his Department have taken flights in chartered private aircraft; what were the relevant origins and destinations; what was the cost to public funds on each occasion; and what were the reasons such a mode of travel was authorised. [63336]

Mr. Mandelson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given to the hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Mr. Maples) on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *889–90*.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much money allocated to the United Kingdom for specific Objective I projects since 1994, has been *(a)* returned and *(b)* renegotiated for later use, because of the failure of agreed projects to materialise in the agreed time. [63154]

Mrs. Roche: All structural funds money allocated to the United Kingdom under Objective 1 since 1994 has been to programmes which cover the period 1994–99. No money from these programmes has been returned or renegotiated for later use.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on *(a)* the definition of the conditions laid down by the European Union in respect of Objective I structural funding, requiring an undertaking by the recipient member state Government to a substantial commitment to substantial spending over the whole period in delivering an agreed programme within the Community Support Framework and *(b)* the United Kingdom Government's interpretation of that definition. [63156]

Mrs. Roche: The European Union structural funds contribute only a proportion of the costs of individual projects. It is for Member States to ensure that matching funding is in place. In the United Kingdom, this responsibility lies with the end beneficiary.

Additionality is also a requirement of the structural funds regulations, and must be verified in respect of the whole territory covered by each Objective within each Member State. This means that UK expenditure on activities eligible for co-financing from the structural funds has to be maintained at least at the same level during the current programming period of 1994–99 as in the previous programming period. The United Kingdom has been able to demonstrate this to the Commission's satisfaction on an annual basis.

Gas-fired Power Stations

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he will announce further decisions on outstanding applications to build new gas-fired power stations. [63809]

Mr. Battle: I have today announced the following decisions:

Coryton Energy Company Limited (InterGen (UK) Ltd.)

A direction has been given under section 14(3) of the Energy Act 1976 that the proposed 750 MW gas-fired generating station at Coryton in Essex may only proceed subject to a condition limiting the use of gas to 10,668 million kilowatt hours (364 million therms) a year. The station already has consent under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 and deemed planning permission.

Medway Power Limited (AES Electric Ltd.)

Consent has been given under section 36 of the Electricity Act 1989 for a 20 MW oil-fired black start facility at the Medway power station in Kent. The facility has also today been given deemed planning permission and (as an oil-fired station) clearance under section 14 of the Energy Act 1976.

Keadby Developments Limited (Scottish Hydro-Electric plc.)

A direction has been given under section 14(3) of the Energy Act 1976 to prevent the building of a 770 MW generating station to be fuelled by natural gas, at Keadby in Lincolnshire.

Barking Power Ltd. (Thames Power Ltd.)

Section 36 consent has not been granted for an open cycle gas turbine generating station (130 MW) and black start facility (24 MW) at the Barking power station. The application will be put on hold unless an interested party satisfies the Secretary of State that it should be determined at this stage.

AES Partington Ltd. (AES Electric Ltd.)

Section 36 consent has not been granted for a 380 MW combined cycle gas turbine generating station at Partington, Old Trafford, Greater Manchester. The application will be put on hold unless an interested party satisfies the Secretary of State that it should be determined at this stage.

InterGen (UK) Ltd.

Section 36 consent has not been granted for a 800 MW combined gas turbine generating station at Spalding in Lincolnshire. The application will be put on hold unless an interested party satisfies the Secretary of State that it should be determined at this stage.

These decisions have been taken in accordance with the policy set out in the White Paper entitled "Conclusions of The Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee" (Cm 4071). In the case of the decision on Coryton, the partial clearance arose from the unique circumstances and their impact on the interests of the developer.

In cases where section 36 consent has not been granted or a section 14(3) direction given, the Secretary of State would be prepared to review the position, if requested, when the stricter consents policy announced in the White Paper is relaxed.

Decisions on other applications under consideration will be announced in due course.

Copies of the relevant Press Notices and letters are being placed in the Library of the House.

Pesticides

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what studies his Department carried out into the impact of a pesticides tax on the costs of small and medium-sized distributors of such products. [63268]

Mr. Battle: My Department has been closely involved with the extensive research work which DETR has

commissioned on the feasibility of an economic instrument to assist in delivering the Government's pesticides minimisation policy. The research has included assessment of the effects of such an instrument on the competitiveness of distributors.

My Department has not carried out any separate studies, but has asked the British Agrochemicals Association to work with the UK Agricultural Supply Trade Association, to provide information on the structure of the industry in order to further assess the impact on distributors and manufacturers.

Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will list *(a)* by programme over £50,000 and *(b)* the total spending by his Department in Scotland on the identifiable spending areas detailed in Table 7.6A of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 1997–98 (Cmnd 3601); which of these programmes will fall solely or jointly under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament; and what arrangements are in place to transfer control of funds for these projects to the Scottish Executive or Parliament; [63282]

(2) how much is spent annually by his Department on research programmes in Scotland; and what proportion of this funding will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament after devolution; [63281]

(3) what assessment he has made of the programmes which it will be ultra vires for his Department to fund or have sole responsibility for after devolution; if he will list these programmes; and if he will make a statement. [63283]

Mr. Mandelson: Under the terms of the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish Ministers will assume responsibility for a range of devolved functions which will in part depend on secondary legislation which has yet to be passed. My Department is reviewing its programmes, including the research components, in the light of the Scotland Act. It is too early to say to what extent programme expenditure which is currently administered by the Department may relate to functions which will transfer to Scottish Ministers. Work is taking place to establish the extent of any such expenditure and to assess the need for any consequential transfer of funds to the Scottish Ministers. For the total spending by the Department in Scotland, I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *615*.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Women's Prisons

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what new guidelines he plans to issue in respect of women prisoners applying for admission to the mother and baby unit in Holloway Prison; [63171]

(2) what are the current guidelines for women prisoners to apply for admission to the mother and baby units in *(a)* Styal, *(b)* New Hall and *(c)* Askham Grange prisons. [63170]

Mr. George Howarth: The women's policy group of the Prison Service are conducting a review of principles, policies and procedures for mothers and babies in prison. The review will be completed by 31 March 1999. The review, with recommendations for a future strategy, will be submitted to the Director General by 31 March 1999. This review will be published. A copy of the current guidance is available in the Library.

Prisoners (Repatriation)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to review procedures for the repatriation of prisoners serving a sentence in England and Wales to their country of origin; and if he will make a statement; [63050]

(2) how many foreign prisoners were repatriated to their country of origin in *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* the first nine months of 1998; and how many in each case were repatriated to the Republic of Ireland. [63051]

Mr. George Howarth: Details of prisoners who have been transferred from England and Wales to foreign jurisdictions under the Council of Europe Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons over the period in question, and, of these, the numbers transferred to the Republic of Ireland, are set out in the table.

No prisoners were transferred from England and Wales under the Commonwealth Scheme for the transfer of Convicted Offenders or the United Kingdom's bilateral prisoner transfer agreements with Egypt, Thailand and Hong Kong.

Procedures for handling applications from prisoners in England and Wales who wish to serve out their sentence in their own country, including the criteria and arrangements for their removal, are kept under regular review.

Year	*Number*
Prisoners transferred to foreign jurisdictions	
1995	12
1996	21
1997	17
1998[1]	44
Prisoners transferred to the Republic of Ireland	
1995	0
1996	7
1997	12
1998[1]	27

[1] up to and including 7 December

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many prisoners serving sentences of imprisonment in England and Wales were transferred under the Council of Europe Convention on the transfer of sentenced prisoners during *(a)* 1995, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1997 and *(d)* 1998 to date; and how many of these prisoners emanated from the Irish Republic; [63039]

(2) how many foreign nationals serving sentences of imprisonment in England and Wales are nationals of countries to which repatriation of prisoners from the United Kingdom may take place under the terms of the Council of Europe Convention on the transfer of sentenced prisoners. [63037]

Mr. George Howarth: The numbers of prisoners transferred from England and Wales to foreign jurisdictions under the Council of Europe Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons, over the period in question, and of those, the numbers transferred to the Republic of Ireland, are set out in the table.

No prisoners were transferred from England and Wales under the Commonwealth Scheme for the Transfer of Convicted Offenders or the United Kingdom's bilateral prisoner transfer agreements with Egypt, Thailand and Hong Kong.

On 30 September 1998, the number of sentenced prisoners held in establishments in England and Wales recorded as being nationals of the 41 countries to which repatriation from the United Kingdom is possible under the terms of the Council of Europe Convention on the Transfer of Sentenced Persons was 1,424.

Year	*Number*
Prisoners transferred to foreign jurisdictions	
1995	12
1996	21
1997	17
1998[1]	44
Prisoners transferred to the Republic of Ireland	
1995	0
1996	7
1997	12
1998[1]	27

[1] Up to and including 7 December

Prison Offences

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 9 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *41*, if the figures for the total number of offences referred to the police for prosecution by prison governors in each year contained in table 2 are directly comparable; for what reason no figures are available for 1993; what assessment he has made of the increase in the number of offences in prison; and if he will make a statement. [63084]

Mr. George Howarth: The figures quoted in my response of 9 November are not directly comparable, as information for 1992–95 relates to cases referred by prison governors to the police which resulted in a prosecution, while figures for 1996 and 1997 relate to the number of cases referred to the police for prosecution but where the outcome is not known.

Comparable, revised figures regarding the number of cases referred to the police by prison governors but where it is not known if a prosecution resulted are given in the table.

Estimated number of offences referred to the police for prosecution by prison governors

Year	*Amount*
1992	580
1993	780
1994	910
1995	1,240
1996	1,600
1997	1,500

Prisons (Costs)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how the net operating cost figure for contracted out prisons per place per annum which is contained in the HM Prison Service Annual report for the last financial year was calculated; and if he will make a statement. [63049]

Mr. George Howarth: The statistical information about contracted-out prison costs shown on page 56 of the Prison Service Annual Report for 1997–98 was calculated by dividing the "net operating costs" by either the "average baseline certified normal accommodation" or the "average prisoner population". The data shown for individual prisons listed—Blakenhurst, Buckley Hall, Doncaster, and The Wolds—are correct. Unfortunately, the summary figures shown have been distorted by including the average Certified Normal Accommodation and average prisoner population data for the contracted prisons—Altcourse, Parc, and Lowdham Grange—which opened towards the end of the operational year. This error has also carried forward into the summary table shown on page 55 of the Report. I have arranged for corrected copies of these tables to be placed in the Library.

Despite these errors, the contracted-out prisons continue to provide good value for money. But, perhaps more importantly, the figures shown that the gap between the contracted-out prisons' costs and public sector prisons' costs continues to reduce.

Former Secretary of State for Wales

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much police time was expended investigating the complaint of the right hon. Member for Caerphilly (Mr. Davies) of assault and robbery in Brixton on the evening of 26 October, broken down by rank of officer involved. [62875]

Kate Hoey: The Commissioner tells me that some 656 hours of local officers' time were spent on the investigation, as set out in the table:

	Hours
Detective Constable/Police Constable	402
Detective Inspector	160
Inspector	14
Detective Chief Inspector	80
Total	656

Other, senior officers were also involved with the case from time to time, but it is not practicable to calculate the duration of their involvement.

Coldingley

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what loans Wackenhut has received from HM Prison Service in connection with prison workshops at HMP Coldingley; and if such loans have been repaid; [62928]

(2) what plans there are for the repayment of loans and debts owed to the Prison Service in respect of workshops at HMP Coldingley; [62925]

(3) if Wackenhut have paid HM Prison Service for public utilities they have used at HMP Coldingley since November 1997. [62829]

Mr. George Howarth: A loan of £105,000 was made to Wackenhut (UK) Ltd. in April 1998, of which £52,500 has been repaid. The Prison Service has asked for immediate repayment of the outstanding amount, together with amounts relating to utilities costs, which are payable by Wackenhut under the terms of the contract.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the efficiency of operation of laundry, metal workshop and sign-making facilities at HMP Coldingley since 1997. [62926]

Mr. George Howarth: The Prison Service is awaiting the production of audited accounts by the contractor, Wackenhut (UK) Ltd. to enable a full assessment to be made.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if Wackenhut have paid HM Prison Service for plant and machinery used by them at workshops at HM Prison Coldingley since November 1997. [62930]

Mr. George Howarth: The contract with Wackenhut (UK) Ltd. for the management of the Coldingley Prison industries does not require a payment from the company for industrial plant and machinery.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what requests Wackenhut have made for renegotiation of the contract for providing workshops at HMP Coldingley. [62927]

Mr. George Howarth: Wackenhut (UK) Ltd. have expressed interest in re-negotiating the terms of the contract. The Prison Service is considering this.

Foreign Prisoners

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many foreign nationals were serving sentences of imprisonment in England and Wales at the most recent available date. [63038]

Mr. George Howarth: The latest available provisional information is for 30 September 1998. On that date, there were 3,545 sentenced foreign nationals (3,206 males and 339 females) in prisons in England and Wales.

Information on the number of sentenced foreign nationals in prisons in England and Wales is published in "Prison statistics England and Wales" (Table 6.4 of the 1997 edition, cm 4017), a copy of which is in the Library.

Common Criminal Justice System (European Union)

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the steps taken within the European Union to promote a common criminal justice system; and if he will make a statement. [62639]

Kate Hoey: Neither the Commission nor any of the member states has tabled formal legislative proposals for a common criminal justice system in the European Union. The proposals which have been made are contained in a research study entitled "Corpus Juris", published in 1997 under the aegis of the European Commission, which recommends common penal rules and procedures to protect the financial interests of the European Community, and also the creation of an office of European Public Prosecutor. A further study is now being carried out for the Commission on the feasibility of these proposals.

Although the Government fully share the objective of fighting fraud against the Community budget, we disagree with many of the recommendations of the "Corpus Juris" study. None of the recommendations have been submitted to the Council of the European Union, but if this were to happen, unanimous agreement would be needed for them to be adopted and come into effect. The Government see no prospect that it could support proposals for a common criminal justice system.

Local Crime Strategies

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what letters or circulars have been issued by his Department to police authorities, chief constables or local police partnerships recommending what should be included in local crime and disorder strategies. [62876]

Mr. Boateng: The Crime and Disorder Act 1998 does not specify what should be included in the crime and disorder reduction strategies. This is a matter for local decision by the local authority and police, in partnership with a wide range of other bodies and in consultation with the community as a whole, based upon the priorities to emerge from local crime and disorder audits. The Home Office has, therefore, made no recommendation in this respect, although guidance dealing inter alia with the process of strategy development was issued to partnerships and other interested parties in July 1998.

Gaming Act 1968

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received in response to the consultation paper on modernisation of the Gaming Act 1968. [63027]

Mr. George Howarth: We went out to consultation on 5 August on proposals to relax certain controls imposed by the Gaming Act 1968 on casino membership, advertising and jackpot machines. The consultation period ended on 21 October.

We received 37 responses, mostly in support of the proposals. We are discussing matters of detail with the industry and aim to make our intentions known in the New Year.

Crime and Disorder Act 1998

Mr. Nicholas Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will consult the National Association of Local Councils about the implementation of the provisions of the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 as they affect town, parish and community councils in England and Wales. [62931]

Mr. Boateng: Home Office officials corresponded with, and talked to, representatives of the National Association of Local Councils during the early Parliamentary stages of the Crime and Disorder Act.

I would, of course, welcome the opportunity to further discuss the implications of the Act with representatives from the National Association of Local Councils, if they so wish.

Prison Visits

Mr. Dawson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the assisted prison visits scheme. [63768]

Mr. Straw: The assisted prison visits scheme exists to help prisoners maintain contact with their close relatives and partners. The scheme was established in 1988. To qualify for assistance in meeting the costs of travel to and from the prison, the visitor must be in receipt of a low income benefit as administered by the Benefits Agency.

The scheme does not distinguish between married and non-married partners, but financial assistance is extended to same-sex partners only at the expense of support for a prisoner's family members. In consequence, some prisoners, including young offenders, do not receive visits from parents or close relatives.

The Government are keen to encourage all prisoners to maintain family ties, and believe that same-sex partners should be treated fairly by the Prison Service. Therefore, both partners and relatives will, in future, be able to receive assistance with the cost of visiting, within the qualifying conditions of the scheme.

Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much is spent annually by his Department on research programmes in Scotland; and what proportion of this funding will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament after devolution. [63290]

Mr. Straw: The principal responsibilities of the Home Office in respect of the police, probation, fire and prison services, and in respect of the criminal justice system, relate only to England and Wales. Almost all the research conducted by the Home Office concerns, in one way or another, the operation in future of these services and systems in England and Wales. In view of the separate Scottish legal system, research in these areas has been the responsibility of the Scottish Office and the question of a transfer does not arise.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* by programme over £50,000 and *(b)* the total spending by his Department in Scotland on the identifiable spending areas detailed in Table 7.6A of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 1997–98 (Cmnd 3601); which of these programmes will fall solely or jointly under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament; and what arrangements are in place to transfer control of funds for these projects to the Scottish Executive or Parliament. [63291]

Mr. Straw: Work is in train to identify areas in which it might be appropriate to effect a transfer of funds. I will make a statement in the *Official Report* when this work has been completed.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the programmes which it will be ultra vires for his Department to fund or have sole responsibility for after devolution; if he will list these programmes; and if he will make a statement. [63292]

Mr. Straw: The position is being examined in the light of the Scotland Act 1998 and work is in train to identify cases where it may be appropriate to transfer functions. I will make a statement in the *Official Report* when the work reaches a conclusion.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Minimum Wage

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the number of people in Northern Ireland who will benefit from the introduction of the minimum wage. [62261]

Mr. Ingram: Current estimates indicate that some 57,000 employees in employment in Northern Ireland will benefit directly from the introduction of the national minimum wage in April 1999.

Floyd and Palmer (Judicial Review)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will place a copy of the judgment in the judicial review case of Floyd and Palmer in the Library; and if she will ensure that the provision of reading and writing materials for suspects held under counter or anti-terrorist legislation is dealt with in the review of legislation presently in progress. [62264]

Mr. Ingram: I have made arrangements for the Lord Chief Justice's Judgment in the Judicial Review case of Damien Floyd and Pauline Palmer to be placed in the Library of the House today. There is no statutory requirement for the provision of reading and writing materials for detainees held under the emergency legislation. However, the consultation paper on new counter-terrorism legislation will open for discussion the general regime for the detention of terrorist suspects, and interested parties will have an opportunity to comment.

Compensation (Wrongful Convictions)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much has been paid during each of the last 10 years in compensation to persons wrongly convicted; and what was *(a)* the highest, *(b)* the lowest and *(c)* the average sum awarded. [62267]

Mr. Ingram: During the relevant period, the total amounts of compensation paid to persons whose convictions have been quashed were, by year:

Year	*Amount awarded (£)*
1993	75,000.00
1994	25,000.00
1995	650,000.00
1997	263,969.50
1998	82,936.21

Only one application for compensation has been paid in full, amounting to £456,905.71. It is not possible, therefore, to provide information about the highest, lowest and average amounts awarded.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps she has taken to make available the published guidelines on compensation for miscarriages of justice to interested parties. [62268]

Mr. Ingram: The guidelines on compensation for miscarriages of justice are automatically made available to the legal representatives of all persons the Secretary of State has determined to be eligible for such compensation. They are also available on request to other interested parties.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people whose convictions have been quashed over each of the last 10 years have *(a)* applied for and *(b)* received compensation. [62266]

Mr. Ingram: *(a)* The numbers of persons who have applied for statutory compensation after their convictions had been quashed during the relevant period were, by year:

Year	*Applicants*
1992	3
1997	1

(b) All of these persons have been paid compensation in full or have been paid interim amounts.

Designated Police Stations

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will *(a)* list designated police stations and their approximate location, *(b)* indicate the number of interview rooms currently available in each and *(c)* estimate and break down the cost of fitting one room in each station with video recording equipment, indicating capital costs for equipment, building works (alterations), installation and running costs for the first year and subsequent years. [62262]

Mr. Ingram: Designated police stations and the number of interview rooms available in each are shown.

Division	*Station*	*Number Interview Rooms*
A	Musgrave Street, Belfast	2
B	Grosvenor Road, Belfast	3
	Lisburn, Co. Antrim	2
D	Antrim Road, Belfast	2
	Antrim	2
E	Strandtown, Belfast	2
G	Newtownards, Co. Down	2
	Downpatrick Co. Down	2
H	Armagh	1
J	Lurgan, Co. Armagh	2
	Banbridge, Co. Down	2
K	Cookstown, Co. Tyrone	2
	Dungannon, Co. Tyrone	2
L	Enniskillen, Co. Fermanagh	2
	Omagh, Co. Tyrone	3
N	Strand Road, Londonderry	5
	Waterside, Londonderry	2
	Strabane, Co. Tyrone	2
O	Coleraine, Co. Londonderry	2
	Limavady, Co. Londonderry	2
P	Ballymena, Co. Antrim	2
	Larne, Co. Antrim	2
Total		48

The cost of fitting out one room is broken down as follows:

	£
Capital costs for equipment:	
1 x video interview recording system	4,400
2 x fixed colour cameras	700
Building works (alterations):	
Electrical work	3,000
Building work	1,550
Contingencies @ 10 per cent.	450
Installation:	
16 hours labour @ £24.30 per hour	389
Cabling, brackets, domes	300
Estimated total:	10,789

Note:
Maintenance is estimated at £400 per annum together with the cost of video tapes at £6.00 each.

Judicial Review (Holding Centres)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what response has been made by the RUC Chief Constable to the request of the Independent Commissioner for the Holding Centres that he be given copies of court papers served in the course of judicial review cases involving the holding centres. [62265]

Mr. Ingram: This matter was raised in the Independent Commissioner's fifth Annual Report, with the recommendation that the applicant be ordered to serve the Independent Commissioner with the appropriate Court papers. As there is no provision in the Rules of the Supreme Court to allow for this, it was suggested that the Commissioner take the matter up directly with the Chief Constable. I am advised that the Chief Constable has not received any request from the Commissioner to be given copies of court papers in the circumstances described.

Millennium (Emergency Cover)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans her Department has to contract with the armed services to provide emergency cover over the millennium period; and what estimate she has made of the cost of that cover. [62571]

Mr. Ingram: At present no Government Department can have firm plans involving military support over the millennium period because these will need to be considered in a co-ordinated manner and priorities identified if the demand is too great. The Ministry of Defence have invited Departments to identify by Easter

1999 predictable demands. By then most Departmental plans should be advanced enough to enable potential problems, which may require military aid, to be identified.

At this stage no estimate can be made of likely costs.

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what is her e-mail address. [62877]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The E-mail address for the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is mm@nics.gov.uk.

Lagan Valley Regional Park

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many planning applications of a residential and commercial nature have been made in the Lagan Valley Regional Park, within the Borough of Lisburn, since the commencement of the Lagan Valley Regional Park Local Plan; and how many of these applications have received planning permission. [62904]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Planning Service under its Chief Executive, Mr. T. W. Stewart. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from T. W. Stewart to Mr. Jeffrey Donaldson, dated 10 December 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Question about planning permissions granted for residential and commercial developments in the Lagan Valley Regional Park, within the Borough of Lisburn, since the commencement of the Lagan Valley Regional Park Local Plan.

Details of the number of applications submitted since the Plan was adopted on 13 March 1995 are set out in the table below.

Type of Application	*No. of Applications*	*No. Approved*	*No. Refused*	*No. Pending*
Industrial-Commercial	15	14	—	1
Housing development (more than one dwelling)	8	5	1	2
Single dwellings	9	6	3	—
Extensions to dwellings	29	27	2	—

You may wish to note that the vast majority of those applications approved are located within the Belfast Urban Area of the Park or in existing settlements.

I do hope this provides all the information you require.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the special advisers in her Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62848]

Marjorie Mowlam: My Special Advisers are Nigel Warner and Andrew Lappin and they advise me on the full range of issues for which I am responsible.

Special Advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements. It is not appropriate to give details about particular individuals level of security clearance.

Police Complaints Procedures

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list *(a)* the steps she is taking to increase public confidence in police complaints procedures, *(b)* the measures taken to assure complainants that they may supply information confidentially and without fear of intimidation and *(c)* in cases where an interview is required to obtain further information, what choices are offered to a complainant with regard to (i) the time, date and location of interview, (ii) the gender of interviewer and (iii) whether a non-uniformed or civilian interviewer is preferred. [61970]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 December 1998]: (a)* The Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998 provides for the establishment of a new office of Police Ombudsman to handle complaints against the police. The Ombudsman will have complete control of the complaints process. The Ombudsman will independently investigate all serious complaints against the police and will decide how others are to be investigated. The new system is designed to secure the confidence of both the public and the police. The Ombudsman will be appointed on 1 March 1999 and the new body will be functioning by summer 1999.

(b) Information and statements provided by complainants are confidential documents. They are disclosed only in circumstances considered necessary to the investigation and in accordance with:

(i) the RUC (Discipline and Disciplinary Appeals) Regulations 1988;

(ii) NIO Guidance to the Chief Constable on Police Complaints and Discipline Procedures;

(iii) the code and legislation dealing with disclosure in respect of criminal prosecutions;

(iv) rules relating to disclosure in civil proceedings.

If, of course, there was intimidation, then this would be grounds for a complaint.

(c1) The initial letter forwarded to the complainant by the RUC Investigating Officer usually offers an interview, at a specified date and time, at the most suitable and convenient Police Station. The letter also invites the complainant to telephone, or reply by returning a proforma in an addressed and prepaid envelope.

Should a complainant, or their solicitor, wish the interview to take place elsewhere, every effort is made to accommodate their request. Interviews can take place at the offices of the Independent Commission for Police Complaints and at other mutually acceptable locations, including solicitors' offices, homes of complainants and third parties and Church or Community Halls.

(c2) Whilst no choice is offered on gender of the interviewer, the RUC do ensure that the most appropriate Investigating Officer is appointed having regard to the circumstances of the case. In supervised cases, it is open to the Independent Commission for Police Complaints, to approve, or otherwise, the appointment of a particular officer.

(c3) The 1998 regulations require that Investigating Officers are police officers. These officers operate in plain clothes.

In future, under the Police (Northern Ireland) Act 1998, there will be greater opportunity for interviews at neutral venues, and by the independent investigators of the Police Ombudsman.

Fair Employment

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many certificates have been issued under section 42 of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1989 in each year since its enactment. [61971]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* This information is not recorded centrally but a check of our records shows that 43 certificates have been issued, in respect of 39 individuals, under section 42 of the Fair Employment (Northern Ireland) Act 1976. The table gives a breakdown by year.

Year	*Number*
1977	1
1978	3
1980	2
1981	4
1982	1
1983	1
1984	3
1985	[1]5
1986	1
1987	2
1988	7
1989	1
1990	3
1991	4
1993	4
1994	[1]1

[1] Of the certificates issued in 1984 and 1994, 4 were reissues.

Benefit Fraud

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what estimate she has made of the level of benefit fraud within the social security system; and what plans she has to tackle it. [63176]

Mr. McFall: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Social Security Agency under its Chief Executive, Mr. Chris Thompson, and I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Chris Thompson to Mr. Nigel Evans, dated 10 December 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your Parliamentary Question about the estimated levels of fraud within the social security system and plans to tackle such fraud.

The Social Security Agency is in the process of estimating the levels of fraud in the benefit system. The Agency is using a methodology, known as Benefit Review, which as been successfully used by the Benefits Agency to estimate the levels of fraud in Great Britain.

As regards its plans to tackle fraud the Agency is committed to minimising opportunities for fraud and abuse within the social security system. In recent years the Agency has been working even more closely with a wide range of colleagues and other parties to provide a coherent and focused effort in combating fraud and abuse. These include the Benefits Agency in Great Britain, Child Support Agency and Housing Executive in Northern Ireland as well as counterparts in the Department of Social, Community and Family Affairs in the Republic of Ireland.

The Agency is undertaking a wide range of initiatives, which mirror similar work in the Benefits Agency, designed to provide an estimate of the level of fraud within benefit systems, to secure the gateway to benefit systems and to detect and prosecute those who seek to defraud the system. This programme of initiatives is being closely monitored and updated on a regular basis to take account of new developments which may emanate from the Benefits Agency or from new Ministerial objectives. I have recently set up a new Benefit Security Directorate to provide a greater focus and to co-ordinate the programme of work.

I can assure you that the Agency will continue to seek new ways of ensuring that resources are targeted effectively at known areas of risk and that expenditure loss through fraud is kept to a minimum.

I hope this explains the position for you but I would be happy to provide any further information you require.

SCOTLAND

Millennium (Emergency Cover)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans his Department has to contract with the armed services to provide emergency cover over the millennium period; and what estimate he has made of the cost of that cover. [62574]

Mr. McLeish: The Scottish Office has no specific plans for involving the military over the millennium period. There are procedures in place, however, through the standing military aid arrangements, which would be invoked in the event of any requirement for assistance.

It is quite normal for military aid to be sought by local authorities, particularly over the winter, but as yet it is too early to identify any specific requirements which they or other bodies may have over the millennium period.

HIV-AIDS

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what estimate he has made of the cost of treatments for Aids-related conditions over the next financial year. [62529]

Mr. Galbraith: Health Boards in Scotland are expected to meet the cost of such treatments from within the general allocations of funds provided to them each year. In order to assist Boards in planning services for HIV/AIDS patients, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State recently set up an expert group to recommend treatment protocols and to estimate the numbers of HIV/AIDS patients likely to be eligible for treatment with the new anti-retroviral drugs in the next few years. The group's report should be available shortly.

Forestry

Mr. Russell Brown: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he intends to prepare a strategy for forestry in Scotland. [63808]

Mr. Macdonald: Forestry is an important part of the rural scene in Scotland. Its importance will grow as timber production doubles over the next 15 years and Scotland's forests and woodlands become more valuable for recreation and wildlife. We believe that it is important to have a strategy for forestry in Scotland which will provide

a context for forestry policies and programmes. This will ensure that forestry integrates well with other aspects of the rural economy and plays its full part in the future well-being of Scotland.

Clearly, the Scottish Executive will want to determine the form and content of a Scottish Forestry Strategy. Nevertheless, we consider that it would be helpful to prepare an issues paper which could form the basis for consultation on a strategy.

We have therefore asked the Forestry Commission to set this work in hand, in liaison with other relevant Government Departments and Agencies, with a view to publishing an issues paper early next year.

Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what discussions he has had with his ministerial colleagues regarding the transfer of funding for United Kingdom programmes operating in Scotland where sole or joint responsibility transfers to the Scottish Parliament or Executive; if he will list the projects he has identified as being within the sole or joint competence of the Scottish Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [63302]

Mr. McLeish: Under the Scotland Act 1998, Scottish Ministers will take over the delivery of public services that currently fall within the responsibility of the Secretary of State for Scotland. In addition, devolution will bring extra responsibilities to Scotland in areas such as transport and environment. Officials are currently discussing the details, including the issue of additional transfers of funding. There may also be cases where it is agreed by all concerned that the best course is a shared programme, which continues to be funded on a UK or GB basis.

Regiments and Bands

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has made to the Secretary of State for Defence concerning requests for regiments to participate in the ceremonies for the opening of the Scottish Parliament; and what steps he is taking to ensure prominence is given to Scottish regiments and bands based in Scotland. [63303]

Mr. Dewar: I have made no such representations to the Secretary of State for Defence. However, the Services are represented on The Scottish Parliament Opening Ceremony Working Group which is taking forward the detailed planning of the event. In its deliberations, the Group will be considering to what extent military personnel, including Scottish regiments and bands based in Scotland, should be involved.

PRIME MINISTER

Performance and Innovation Unit

Mr. Illsley: To ask the Prime Minister what progress has been made with the establishment of the Performance and Innovation Unit. [63769]

The Prime Minister: The Performance and Innovation Unit (PIU) is now firmly established as an integral part of the new structure for the Cabinet Office that I announced on 28 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *132–34*.

The Unit is beginning its work to improve the capacity of Government to identify and address strategic, cross-cutting issues and promote innovation in the development of policy and in the delivery of the Government's objectives. Its first five projects will focus on:

Developing Electronic Commerce in the UK

How to achieve the Government's goal of making the UK the world's best environment for electronic commerce, ensuring that the UK benefits fully from the single fastest growing market place in the global economy;

Active Aging

How to improve the well-being and quality of life of older people by helping them to remain active. The study will identify ways of increasing the employment opportunities for older people, by examining the incentives for businesses to employ and retain older people and for individuals to remain in paid or voluntary work;

Central Government's Role at Regional and Local Level

Getting the right arrangements in place for joined-up delivery of central Government policies in regions and communities;

Accountability and Incentives for Joined-Up Government

Examining whether current accountability arrangements and incentive systems can be reformed to facilitate joined-up policy-making and delivery, for example by promoting the achievement of joint objectives which require co-operation between departments; and

Objectives for rural economies

Examining the differing needs of local rural economies, and the key factors affecting performance, so as to establish clear objectives for Government policies influencing the future development of rural economies.

The PIU's review teams will be drawn from both inside and outside Government, to ensure that we bring new thinking and a wide range of experience to bear on the issues. The aim is to complete most of these reviews by next summer. Decisions flowing from the PIU's work will be announced in the normal way.

House of Lords

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister what proposals he has to set up a committee of both Houses of Parliament charged with undertaking a wide-ranging review of the House of Lords and to bring forward proposals for reform. [63257]

The Prime Minister: The Government have decided to build on their Manifesto proposal for a committee of both Houses of Parliament to consider further reform of the House of Lords, by first appointing a Royal Commission to undertake a wide-ranging review and to bring forward recommendations. A joint committee would be set up after the Royal Commission had reported.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups her

Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62814]

Mr. Foulkes: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) on 30 July 1998, *Official Report*, column 462.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

BSE (Offspring Cull)

Mr. Rhodri Morgan: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will report on the progress of the BSE offspring cull. [63771]

Mr. Nick Brown: Before exports of British beef can resume under the Date Based Export Scheme (DBES) the UK must slaughter all offspring born after 1 August 1996 to BSE cases confirmed before 25 November 1998 (the date of the Commission Decision on the DBES). When new cases of BSE occur any offspring born after 1 August 1996 must be slaughtered without delay.

We have known for some time that this cull would be necessary and started it on a voluntary basis in August. We have been waiting for formal adoption of the Commission Decision in order to make it compulsory and ensure that the cull is properly carried out. Regulations are being laid before the House today for this purpose.

Since the cull started on a voluntary basis in August we have, with the co-operation of the farming community, culled over 1,000 animals. The compulsory cull, which will come into force in January, will ensure that all remaining offspring animals are slaughtered and clear the way for the resumption of beef exports.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Lety Concentration Camp

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make representations to the Government of the Czech Republic concerning the building of a pig farm on the site of the Lety Concentration Camp in contravention of the Helsinki Accord. [62692]

Ms Quin: We are aware of the ongoing discussions concerning an appropriate future for the site at Lety and hope that the Czech Government will soon reach a decision that is acceptable to all parties.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62803]

Mr. Fatchett: The information is as follows:

Task Forces: Nil

Review Panels: Nil

Advisory Groups:

1. Panel 2000

Panel 1000 was established on 1 April 1998 to:

- produce a strategy to improve the way Britain is seen overseas;
- look at the methods and tools available to do this;
- make sure that the public and private sectors are working together to do this; and
- modernise the way the Foreign and Commonwealth Office communicates with the public.

Panel members:

Chairman: Derek Fatchett MP

Members (Private Sector):

- Lord Alli—Plant 24
- Zeinab Badawi—Journalist
- Martin Bell MP
- Baroness Chalker
- Lord Clinton-Davies
- Dr. Francis D'Souza—Article 19
- Mark Fisher MP
- David John—British Oxygen Company
- Mark Leonard—Foreign Policy Centre
- Lord Levy
- Ruth Mackenzie—Scottish Opera
- Lord Marshall—British Airways
- Lord Paul—Caparo
- Shahwar Sadeque—Consultant IT/education
- Judy Simpson—Athlete
- Martin Sorrell—WPP
- John Sorrell—Newell & Sorrell/Design Council
- Harriet Ware-Austin—Amnesty International

Members (Public Sector):

- Baroness Blackstone—Department for Education and Employment
- Dr. David Drewry—British Council
- Andrew Fraser—Invest in Britain Bureau
- Tom Harris—Department of Trade and Industry
- Roger Liddle—No. 10 Policy Unit
- Peter Mandelson MP—Secretary of State for Trade and Industry
- David Quarmby—British Tourist Authority

FCO

- Baroness Symons—Parliamentary Under-Secretary
- Sir John Kerr—Permanent Under-Secretary
- Sir Michael Jay—HM Ambassador Paris
- Claire Fulton
- Priya Guha
- Vivien Life

Panel members do not receive remuneration, although expenses are payable.

2. Diplomatic Service Appeal Board

The Board aims to advise the Secretary of State whether premature retirement, or termination of an appointment on grounds of failed probation, or on dismissal grounds is fair.

Panel members

- Sir Keith Morris (Chairman)—Retired
- Peter Fowler (Vice Chairman)—Retired
- Juliet Campbell—Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge

Rodney Bedford—Retired

Sally Bull—Retired

Lady Jacqueline Dyson—Lecturer in Law

Kamlesh Bahl—Legal Adviser and Chair of the Equal Opportunities Commission

No appointments are full time. Remuneration is only paid per diem when the Board meets. It did not meet in 1997–98.

3. Wilton Park Academic Council

The Council aims to ensure that Wilton Park retains full academic independence; it oversees Wilton Park's programme with this objective.

Panel members

Liliana Archibald—(Chairman)

Anthony Bruce—Chairman, Marconi Overseas Ltd.

Juliet Campbell—Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge

Robin Corbett MP

Lord Holme

Tony Young—Joint General Secretary Commonwealth Workers Union

Gael Ramsay—Chief Executive, British Executive Services Overseas

Andrew Rowe MP

Helen Wallace—Director, Sussex European Institute, University of Sussex

Michael Walsh—Secretary, International Department, TUC

Lady Suzanne Warner—Deputy Chair, Broadcasting Standards Commission

Nik Gowing

Panel members do not receive any remuneration, but expenses are payable.

4. Government Hospitality Fund Advisory Committee for the Purchase of Wine

The aim of the Committee is to advise on the purchasing of wine for government hospitality.

Committee members

Sir Ewen Fergusson (Chairman)—Company Chairman

Anthony Hanson—wine consultant

Sebastian Payne—wine buyer

Mark Savage—wine merchant

John Avery—wine merchant

Committee members receive no remuneration, although expenses are payable.

Edgar Fernandez Case

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what steps his Department has taken to encourage the Maltese and Turkish authorities to pursue and bring to a conclusion extradition proceedings relating to Mohammed Abdel Abbas Ali. [62599]

Mr. Fatchett: I refer my hon. Friend to my answers of 29 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *271*. Our staff in Valletta and Ankara continue to remind the Turkish and Maltese Governments of the importance we attach to this extradition being processed as quickly as possible. My noble Friend the Under-Secretary raised the matter with the Turkish Ambassador on 2 December and the Vice-Consul in Valletta spoke to the Maltese Attorney General's office on 3 December.

China

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to China regarding the deaths of prisoners at Drapchi Prison in May who had chanted slogans during a visit by EU ambassadors. [63137]

Mr. Fatchett: When EU Ambassadors visited Drapchi prison on 4 May there was no evidence of any disturbances having occurred. Prisoners did not chant slogans. News of disturbances reached the Ambassadors only after their return to Beijing. We are very concerned about the reported deaths of prisoners and we have raised the incident with the Chinese authorities, both bilaterally and in conjunction with EU partners.

Angola

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if his Department has contacted UNITA in order to obtain information about Jason Pope, a missing British citizen in Angola. [63770]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: As an exception, and for the humanitarian purpose of obtaining information about the whereabouts and welfare of Jason Pope, we have sought and obtained an exception to paragraph 12(a) of Security Council resolution 1173. The United Nations Angola Sanctions Committee has granted this exemption to enable our Embassy in Luanda to contact UNITA in areas of Angola not under state administration. A full report of these contacts will be supplied to the Committee.

Our Embassy in Luanda are already in contact with UNITA representatives in Luanda for the same purpose. We have also authorised our Embassy in Washington to approach the UNITA representative in Washington for assistance. Such contacts are not prohibited under UNSCR 1173.

Sierra Leone

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if any officials in his Department saw a copy of Peter Penfold's letter of 30 December 1997 to Miss Grant prior to 6 April 1997. [63269]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Sir Thomas Legg's Report (paragraph 5.29) states that

"in spite of searches there, it [Mr. Penfold's letter of 30 December 1997] cannot be traced at the FCO, and seems never to have arrived".

Legg records (paragraph 6.59) that the FCO (Equatorial Africa Department) finally obtained a copy from Freetown on 6 April.

Overseas Price Mechanism

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to review the overseas price mechanism; and if he will make a statement. [63082]

Mr. Fatchett: Officials in the FCO and HM Treasury are conducting a review into the operation of the OPM calculation. It is expected that this will be concluded shortly.

Belarus

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's relations with Belarus. [63134]

Ms Quin: Ministerial contacts with Belarus were suspended in 1997 by HMG and EU Partners following concerns about a constitutional referendum which failed to meet democratic norms, human rights abuses and lack of press freedom. EU member states have also withdrawn their Ambassadors from Minsk in response to the Belarusian Government's effective exclusion of certain Ambassadors from their residences. HMG are keen not to isolate Belarus. We continue to support the OSCE's Advisory and Monitoring Group's efforts to promote democracy in the country.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received about the freedom of individual Belarus MPs to conduct their duties and about their parliamentary immunity; and what representations have been made in this regard to *(a)* the Belarus President and *(b)* the OSCE. [63133]

Ms Quin: We and the EU regard the 13th Supreme Soviet as the legitimate parliament. It was disbanded following the 1996 constitutional referendum which failed to meet democratic standards. In its place, the National Assembly was appointed which is not genuinely representative. However, National Assembly members are free to conduct their parliamentary duties. Together with our EU partners, HMG have regularly raised their concerns with Belarusian Ministers about the flawed constitutional situation and human rights abuses. The OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group was set up in Minsk in February 1998. It helps Belarus to promote democracy and comply with OSCE commitments. HMG support its work and receive regular reports from the OSCE and the British Embassy in Minsk on the situation.

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62824]

Mr. Kilfoyle: At 30 November 1998, the Cabinet Office employed three secondees from private companies, details as follows:

Mr. H. S. Rolfe of Marks and Spencers PLC working in the Efficiency Unit;

Ms A. Jordan of the NatWest bank PLC working in the Social Exclusion Unit; and

Mrs M. Pye of BT working in the Office of the Civil Service Commissioners.

No secondees from private companies are currently employed in any of the Cabinet Office agencies, or in the Central Office of Information which is a separate Department reporting to me.

WALES

Farming

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the amount of Government funding given to the farming industry in each of the last three years. [62912]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Government expenditure on agriculture in Wales was £225.8 million, £265.3 million and £198.5 million in 1995–96, 1996–97 and 1997–98 respectively. The fall during 1997–98 is mainly accounted for by the reduction in expenditure on the EU's Sheep Annual Premium Scheme. This scheme provides for annual deficiency payments, measured in ECUs, on eligible breeding ewes. The reduced expenditure reflects both a strengthening of European sheep prices and the revaluation of the green pound.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is the sum currently allocated to the farming industry for each of the next three financial years, including extra moneys announced this autumn; and if he will make a statement. [62913]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales will announce his spending plans for agriculture for the next three years shortly.

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many farms there are in Wales. [62915]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: There are currently 35,500 farm holdings registered in Wales; 27,900 main farm holdings and 7,600 minor holdings.

NHS Waiting Lists

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on NHS waiting lists in Wales. [62696]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I am pleased to announce that the inpatient waiting list has fallen for 2 consecutive months and currently stands at 73,037—the lowest figure since February 1998. The numbers waiting over 12 months and over 18 months have also fallen, by 309 and 86 respectively.

Outpatient lists to end-October also fell, by 1.6 per cent. to 133,210, the first fall in outpatient lists since January 1998. Although the number waiting over 6 months for an appointment rose by 487, this was a smaller increase than the 1,535 reported in September.

Sheep

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the size of the sheep flock of Wales in *(a)* 1993, *(b)* 1996 and *(c)* currently. [62916]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The information required has been taken from the annual June Agricultural and Horticultural Census and is shown as follows:

Total sheep and lambs in Wales [1]

Year	*Number*
1993	11,256,200
1996	10,874,000
1998 [2]	11,609,300

[1] Includes estimates for minor holdings
[2] Provisional estimate

GP Fundholding

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he proposes to abolish GP fundholding; and if he will make a statement on his proposed alternative arrangements. [62698]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: We shall include provisions to abolish the GP fundholding scheme in the Bill to modernise the NHS. Although a fundholding scheme must remain available until that Bill reaches Royal Assent, this need not take the form of the existing standard and community fundholding schemes. The Department is therefore about to consult the GP representative bodies on proposals to bring these existing arrangements to an end on 31 March 1999 and substitute a residual scheme. This residual scheme would meet the requirements of the current primary legislation, should that still be in force on 1 April 1999, while minimising any disruption to the development of Local Health Groups. No new primary legislation is needed to implement our plans to establish Local Health Groups as Committees of Health Authorities from 1 April 1999.

Welsh Development Agency

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many people are employed by the Welsh Development Agency. [62914]

Mr. Hain: The Welsh Development Agency currently employs 424 permanent staff.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement about the allocation of funds to grant-maintained schools in Wales in 1999–2000. [62981]

Mr. Hain: Grant-maintained schools in Wales will be funded in 1999–2000 in accordance with the Financing of Maintained Schools Regulations 1998 which were laid before Parliament on 3 December.

Welsh Arts Council

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on his plans for the appointment of a new chair to the Welsh Arts Council. [63155]

Mr. Michael: The selection process for a new chair of the Arts Council of Wales began in July with an advertisement in the national press. A shortlist of candidates has been drawn up and interviews will take place as early as possible in the New Year.

A487

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will take steps to avoid the closure of the A487 across the Cob at Porthmadog, during rebuilding of the retaining walls; and what arrangements he has made for the alternative routing of trunk road traffic during the rebuilding. [63175]

Mr. Hain: The Department is presently in discussion with The Rebecca Trust concerning the condition of the retaining walls on either side of the cob at Porthmadog. Ownership of the walls above the A487 rests with the Trust. The Department's Agents, the North West Wales Trunk Road Agency, have been instructed to inspect the walls and consider possible strengthening schemes, which need to minimise traffic disruption. Some temporary closures may, however, be inevitable due to the narrowness of the A487 across the cob. Only on receipt of the strengthening proposals will the need for alternative routes be developed.

Disability Wales

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what progress has been made in addressing the issues raised in the report of the Welsh Office Social Services Inspectorate in August 1998 on the problems of Disability Wales; and what plans he has for the future funding of Disability Wales. [63149]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The final report of the Management Review of Disability Wales was published on 19 November and I have sent a copy to the right hon. Member. I am now awaiting a formal response to the report from the Trustees of Disability Wales.

The Government have a very positive agenda for disabled people, including the establishment of a Disability Right Commission. It is therefore essential that Disability Wales can play a strong and cohesive role during this important period. I hope that the report's recommendations will provide a sound foundation from which the organisation can develop. Welsh Office funding for Disability Wales is secured until 31 March 1999 and I will consider funding for the 1999–2000 financial year in the light of the response from the Trustees to the report by the Social Services Inspectorate for Wales.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62826]

Mr. Mudie: The Department for Education and Employment currently has 8 centrally managed staff seconded from the private sector. The details are as follows:

Secondee	Seconded from	Current position
Prof. Michael Barber	Institute of Education	Head of Standards and Effectiveness Unit
Ms Juliette Brown	Aqument Services	Private Finance Division
Mr. Richard Edwards	The Next Company	National Disability Council Secretariat
Mr. Anil Kumar	Glaxo Wellcome PLC	Higher Education Funding and Organisation Division
Ms Lindsay Oliver	Institute of Education	Effectiveness Division
Mr. Steve Pollock	British Broadcasting Corporation	University for Industry Transition Team
Mr. Europe Singh	British Broadcasting Corporation	University for Industry Transition Team
Mr. Alun Thomas	Royal National Institute for the Blind	National Disability Council Secretariat

Asian Women (Employment Rights)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps the Government are taking to increase the amount of advice and information available to women from the Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities on employment rights and opportunities. [62282]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* First and foremost, the Government fund the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Commission for Racial Equality to advise all individuals on employment rights. More specifically, the DfEE has adopted a Race Equality Strategy committing it, in all its policies and programmes, actively to promote equality between all ethnic and racial groups. The key principles of the strategy are built into all Employment Service programmes, notably the New Deal. This programme is designed to take account of the particular needs of ethnic minorities, including Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, to ensure that ethnic minority young people have advice and support that meets their particular needs. The Employment Service issues multi-lingual publicity leaflets to publicise its programmes.

We also require Government-funded Training and Enterprise Councils to ensure that all sections (ie by ethnic group, gender and disability) of the eligible local population are fully represented on the programmes they run and the services they deliver. If not, the TEC must increase its participation by identifying and tackling whatever barriers exist to recruitment.

Following a recent Social Exclusion Unit report, the Government have set up an Action Team on jobs to look at the particular difficulties facing people from ethnic minorities looking for work and to identify better ways of helping into jobs people like Pakistani and Bangladeshi women, who face some of the toughest barriers to work. It will report to the SEU in July 1999.

Careers Services are also developing imaginative schemes to support ethnic minority women and prepare them to find suitable work. In Bradford, for example, Pakistani and Bangladeshi women are helped by the local Careers Service with information and advice, providing both reassurance and practical assistance, eg with language, to support entry for daughters onto work experience schemes. The local Careers Service also operates a mentoring scheme which draws upon the skills of experienced Pakistani and Bangladeshi community members to train and support young people into jobs.

I recognise that people from ethnic minorities face particular difficulties in moving from education into work. It is because we must find ways of overcoming them that I have made this an early priority for my advisory group, the Race Employment and Education Forum, which met for the first time on 20 October.

Education Council

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the outcome of the Education Council held in Brussels on 4 December; and if he will make a statement. [63164]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Mr. Twigg), on 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *181*.

Performance League Tables

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research he has commissioned on the impact of socio-economic factors on school performance tables. [62584]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* No research has been commissioned on the impact of such factors specifically on performance tables, but in its internal analyses of performance information for school improvement purposes the Department does undertake investigations of the relationship between socio-economic factors and school performance.

Teachers' Pensions

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the review of teachers' pension arrangements and its impact on opportunities for early retirement. [63230]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Working Group on the Review of the Teachers' Pension Scheme has considered all of its terms of reference. These included whether teachers should be allowed to retire early with an actuarially reduced pension at their own request. The Working Group will cover this in its report which I expect to receive in January.

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will report on progress being made by the Working Group on the Review of the Teachers' Pension Scheme; and when he expects it to report. [62923]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Working Group on the Review of the Teachers' Pension Scheme has considered all of its terms of reference. I expect to receive its report in January.

Job Creation

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase local powers *(a)* over job creation and training programmes and *(b)* to co-ordinate different publicly funded regeneration and employment projects. [62344]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* (a) We are committed to the principle that local partnerships should be able to develop solutions to identified local needs. Initiatives such as the Single Regeneration Budget and New Deal for Communities offer vehicles for this, and people, jobs and skills are at their heart. It is crucial that all partners involved in activities focused employability work closely together to ensure that local programmes fit as effectively as possible with national programmes such as New Deal.

The Government support the Local Government Association New Commitment to Regeneration Initiative which is seeking a more co-ordinated and flexible approach to regeneration in 22 pathfinder areas. The Government will work wholeheartedly with the pathfinder areas as they seek new and effective ways of meeting the needs and priorities of their localities.

(b) Helping people in deprived communities to obtain jobs is a high priority in all regeneration initiatives. The 17 New Deal for Communities Pathfinders have been asked to put this at the centre of their plans. Guidelines for Round 5 of the Single Regeneration Budget emphasised the importance of employability.

I also refer my hon. Friend to the reply my right hon. Friend the Deputy Prime Minister gave on 28 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *168–69*, which gives detailed information on steps taken by this Government to improve the co-ordination of area-based initiatives.

Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how much is spent annually by his Department on research programmes in Scotland; and what proportion of this funding will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament after devolution; [63299]

(2) if he will list *(a)* by programme over £50,000 and *(b)* the total of spending by his Department in Scotland on the identifiable spending areas detailed in Table 7.6A of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 1997–98 (Cmnd 3601); which of these programmes will fall solely or jointly under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament; and what arrangements are in place to transfer control of funds for these projects to the Scottish Executive or Parliament. [63300]

(3) what assessment he has made of the programmes which it will be ultra vires for his Department to fund or have sole responsibility for after devolution; if he will list these programmes; and if he will make a statement. [63301]

Mr. Mudie: Under the terms of the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish Ministers will assume responsibility for a range of devolved functions which will in part depend on secondary legislation which has yet to be passed. My Department is reviewing its programmes, including the research components, in the light of the Scotland Act. It is too early to say to what extent programme expenditure which is currently administered by the Department may relate to functions which will transfer to Scottish Ministers. Work is taking place to establish the extent of any such expenditure and to assess the need for any consequential transfer of funds to the Scottish Ministers. For the total spending by the Department in Scotland I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *615*.

Education Channel

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the cost *(a)* in total and *(b)* to public funds of establishing a new broadcast education channel. [63322]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department has no plans to establish a new broadcast education channel and no estimate of possible costs has accordingly been made.

Funding

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money has been allocated in each of the next three financial years for *(a)* the Standards Fund, *(b)* the New Opportunities Fund, *(c)* the Service Development Fund and *(d)* the Small School Support Fund. [63250]

Mr. Blunkett: The Standards Fund programme will be over £900 million in 1999–2000. This includes the DfEE grant and the local education authority contribution. Announcements of the size of the programme in future years will be made in due course.

The Service Development Fund will be £750 million in 2000–01 and £1,000 million in 2001–02.

Details for the Small School Support Fund will be announced in due course. Questions on the New Opportunities Fund are for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport.

Headteachers

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects to publish details of the proposed resources which are to be made available within the school improvement grant element of the Standards Fund for the replacement of headteachers in underperforming schools. [63248]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Green Paper "Teachers—Meeting the Challenge of Change" (Cm 4164) indicates that additional resources will be made available within the Standards Fund to help underperforming schools to get the strong leadership they need. Details of this allocation will be announced in due course.

Virtual Staff College

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Virtual Staff College for Senior Education Officers. [63251]

Ms Estelle Morris: The Virtual Staff College is a project, led by the Society of Education Officers with support from my Department, for the training and

development of local education authority officers. The project includes a competence framework which forms the basis for several newly developed Master's degree courses. Students can mix and match modules from difference universities and combine on-site tuition with distance learning. The project leader is on secondment from the Department. The DfEE is also providing £30,000 for the development of the competence framework, training materials and information.

Teachers

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the recurrent cost of providing funding to guarantee all new teachers the reduced teaching load and programme of support referred to in the Green Paper, "Teachers Meeting the Challenge of Change". [63249]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In 1999–2000 my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will make available £251.5 million in the School Improvement Standards Fund grant to support activity designed to improve standards of pupil performance in order to meet school, LEA and national targets.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many advanced skills teachers have been appointed to date to each salary band. [63246]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The information is not available.

Pupils (Spending)

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the standard spending assessments for education per pupil for each English local authority for 1999–2000. [63255]

Ms Estelle Morris: The following table shows, for each local education authority,

(a) its Primary education SSA per primary pupil;

(b) its Secondary education SSA per secondary pupil; and

(c) its total education SSA.

LEA	(a) Primary SSA per 5–10 pupil £	(b) Secondary SSA per 11–15 pupil £	(c) Total education SSA £ million
City of London	3,341	9,841	0.823
Camden	3,323	4,135	87.405
Greenwich	3,148	4,034	126.198
Hackney	3,514	4,720	103.657
Hammersmith and Fulham	3,305	4,266	63.226
Islington	3,364	4,429	91.734
Kensington and Chelsea	3,315	4,130	40.216
Lambeth	3,521	4,883	111.411
Lewisham	3,293	4,276	127.517
Southwark	3,396	4,381	124.188
Tower Hamlets	3,584	4,624	145.646
Wandsworth	3,082	3,950	98.179
Westminster	3,203	3,915	66.840
Barking and Dagenham	2,693	3,500	84.362
Barnet	2,556	3,221	135.917
Bexley	2,448	3,130	105.895
Brent	2,952	3,846	123.122
Bromley	2,416	3,064	125.844
Croydon	2,625	3,416	140.458
Ealing	2,762	3,619	129.439
Enfield	2,661	3,372	139.354
Haringey	3,049	3,990	110.180
Harrow	2,512	3,268	81.160
Havering	2,406	3,101	99.018
Hillingdon	2,521	3,232	107.889
Hounslow	2,708	3,415	107.140
Kingston upon Thames	2,416	3,071	53.379
Merton	2,576	3,314	66.341
Newham	3,072	3,943	156.662
Redbridge	2,577	3,284	118.381
Richmond upon Thames	2,372	2,989	52.474
Sutton	2,468	3,096	78.844
Waltham Forest	2,845	3,653	111.079
Birmingham	2,509	3,248	506.054
Coventry	2,374	3,053	136.125
Dudley	2,176	2,784	120.419
Sandwell	2,392	3,081	136.000
Solihull	2,169	2,759	88.014
Walsall	2,300	2,936	124.674
Wolverhampton	2,403	3,103	111.897
Knowsley	2,631	3,465	85.254
Liverpool	2,582	3,317	238.351
St. Helens	2,282	2,943	76.521
Sefton	2,274	2,904	122.220
Wirral	2,343	3,028	148.745
Bolton	2,281	2,921	117.547
Bury	2,198	2,800	71.500
Manchester	2,663	3,494	207.706
Oldham	2,342	2,991	108.596
Rochdale	2,363	3,052	96.905
Salford	2,387	3,097	95.263
Stockport	2,155	2,782	104.481
Tameside	2,259	2,885	95.650
Trafford	2,222	2,858	91.122
Wigan	2,195	2,801	125.385
Barnsley	2,278	2,943	87.395
Doncaster	2,359	3,055	136.244
Rotherham	2,274	2,898	116.237
Sheffield	2,314	2,972	195.022
Bradford	2,404	3,114	233.854
Calderdale	2,281	2,935	88.234
Kirklees	2,310	2,964	164.385
Leeds	2,283	2,925	292.500
Wakefield	2,216	2,846	129.015
Gateshead	2,315	2,979	78.279
Newcastle upon Tyne	2,431	3,128	111.057
North Tyneside	2,245	2,909	77.634
South Tyneside	2,360	3,024	68.784
Sunderland	2,330	2,992	129.129
Isles of Scilly	4,136	5,277	1.206
Cambridgeshire	2,224	2,846	190.955
Cheshire	2,173	2,774	263.888
Cornwall	2,283	2,937	189.872
Cumbria	2,255	2,889	195.864
Devon	2,258	2,914	243.787
Essex	2,337	3,003	524.217
Gloucestershire	2,199	2,818	214.838
Herefordshire	2,270	2,927	61.120
Worcestershire	2,168	2,774	198.216
Hertfordshire	2,370	3,029	444.698
Kent	2,337	2,997	553.625
Lancashire	2,259	2,898	468.619
Lincolnshire	2,269	2,916	250.567
Norfolk	2,276	2,912	286.604
Northamptonshire	2,222	2,852	257.805
Northumberland	2,240	2,879	129.290
Nottinghamshire	2,196	2,820	296.082
Oxfordshire	2,291	2,918	217.420
Shropshire	2,220	2,839	100.824
Somerset	2,226	2,863	175.412
Suffolk	2,222	2,836	250.346
Surrey	2,337	2,991	358.271
Warwickshire	2,182	2,796	187.617
West Sussex	2,267	2,905	269.226

LEA	(a) Primary SSA per 5–10 pupil £	(b) Secondary SSA per 11–15 pupil £	(c) Total education SSA £ million
North Yorkshire	2,235	2,843	219.711
Bedfordshire	2,285	2,935	160.984
Buckinghamshire	2,286	2,944	193.629
Derbyshire	2,173	2,791	272.411
Dorset	2,191	2,800	135.276
Durham	2,283	2,943	203.417
East Sussex	2,336	3,009	174.297
Hampshire	2,229	2,871	446.888
Leicestershire	2,119	2,726	228.231
Staffordshire	2,151	2,761	323.123
Wiltshire	2,209	2,847	159.098
Isle of Wight Council	2,397	3,082	52.955
Bath and North East Somerset	2,158	2,717	62.354
City of Bristol	2,338	3,031	134.265
North Somerset	2,170	2,800	68.008
South Gloucestershire	2,115	2,728	93.824
Hartlepool	2,331	2,991	42.580
Middlesbrough	2,451	3,190	68.493
Redcar and Cleveland	2,343	2,988	66.222
Stockton-on-Tees	2,295	2,953	82.138
City of Kingston-upon-Hull	2,412	3,096	114.854
East Riding of Yorkshire	2,186	2,798	121.284
North East Lincolnshire	2,312	2,975	72.999
North Lincolnshire	2,278	2,928	64.980
York	2,172	2,810	60.335
Luton	2,498	3,217	87.649
Milton Keynes	2,365	3,057	92.715
Derby	2,323	2,983	96.869
Poole	2,161	2,766	50.010
Bournemouth	2,271	2,886	55.817
Darlington	2,265	2,925	39.683
Brighton and Hove	2,418	3,103	82.786
Portsmouth	2,410	3,084	72.774
Southampton	2,424	3,136	87.402
Leicester	2,470	3,171	134.753
Rutland	2,190	2,707	11.642
Stoke on Trent	2,281	2,943	99.514
Bracknell Forest	2,340	3,018	41.567
Windsor and Maidenhead	2,343	2,957	51.147
Newbury	2,220	2,822	60.950
Reading	2,392	3,131	48.071
Slough	2,739	3,607	59.011
Wokingham	2,129	2,745	58.507
Peterborough	2,356	3,022	78.899
Halton	2,369	3,070	59.307
Warrington	2,151	2,767	78.552
Plymouth	2,274	2,893	107.756
Torbay	2,285	2,929	49.958
Southend	2,378	3,047	68.888
Thurrock	2,488	3,194	60.506
Rochester and Gillingham	2,313	2,972	117.985
Blackburn	2,442	3,127	70.696
Blackpool	2,289	2,984	52.823
Nottingham City	2,522	3,281	115.257
The Wrekin	2,288	2,939	66.230
Thamesdown	2,200	2,830	73.313
England	2,372	3,033	20,414.000

Sixth Forms

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what guidance his Department has issued on the optimum size of sixth form classes; [62506]

(2) if he will make a statement on the average size of sixth form classes in *(a)* the United Kingdom and *(b)* Norfolk. [62507]

Ms Estelle Morris: The average size of sixth form classes in England is 10.7 and in Norfolk is 10.2. The size of classes in the rest of the United Kingdom is a matter for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland and for Wales.

The Department has issued no guidance on the optimum size of sixth form classes. In deciding what courses to offer in their sixth forms, schools must weigh up issues such as quality of provision, demand for particular courses, breadth of curricular choices accessible to students across the area, cost effectiveness and financial implications for the school as a whole.

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance his Department has issued on the optimum size of a sixth form college so that it is able to provide an appropriate choice of subjects. [62508]

Mr. Mudie: The Department has not issued guidance on the optimum size of sixth form colleges.

TREASURY

Tax Harmonisation

15. **Mr. Nicholls:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how he proposes to ensure that Britain's taxation will not be harmonised with that of the rest of the EU when Britain joins European Monetary Union. [61760]

Dawn Primarolo: Decisions in this area are subject to unanimity. This would not be affected if the UK joined EMU.

29. **Mr. Cash:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his use of the veto in respect of EU tax harmonisation measures relating to *(a)* corporate and company taxation, *(b)* VAT, *(c)* income tax, *(d)* taxes on investment and *(e)* capital taxes. [61775]

Dawn Primarolo: Decisions in all these areas are subject to unanimity. The Government will not support any action at European level that will threaten jobs or the competitive position of British business.

35. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about the Government's policy on proposals for tax harmonisation in Europe. [61782]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government will not support any action at European level that will threaten jobs or the competitive position of British business. Tax harmonisation is not the way forward for Europe. The priority for Europe is the promotion of employment reforms and competitive markets to achieve higher levels of employment and prosperity.

37. **Sir Michael Spicer:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he intends to take to prevent tax harmonisation in the European Union. [61784]

Dawn Primarolo: Decisions in this area are subject to unanimity. The Government will not support any action at European level that will threaten jobs or the competitive position of British business.

Debt Relief (Developing Countries)

16. **Mr. Burstow:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what steps he is taking to accelerate debt relief programmes for developing countries. [61761]

Ms Hewitt: At the annual meetings of the IMF and World Bank the Chancellor maintained momentum towards his Mauritius Mandate targets and has subsequently taken initiatives to help post-catastrophe countries.

NHS Expenditure

18. **Mr. McNulty:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his public expenditure plans for the NHS for the next three years. [61764]

Mr. Byers: In the Comprehensive Spending Review on 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 187–211, we announced an extra £21 billion for health in the UK for the next three years.

This is the biggest cash increase in the history of the NHS and, combined with our programme of reform, will provide the stable funding base needed to deliver the Government's commitment to modernise the NHS.

Coupled with the £250 million for the UK this year, which my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced in the House on 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, column 688, of which £209 million is for England, this means health spending in England will rise by 3.8 per cent. a year over the lifetime of this Parliament. Figures for other countries of the United Kingdom are a matter for my right hon. Friends the Secretaries of State for Scotland, for Wales and for Northern Ireland.

Public Spending

19. **Mr. Plaskitt:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about his priorities for public spending for the next three years, with particular reference to the balancing of budgets across the economic cycle. [61765]

Mr. Byers: The Government are committed to spend an extra £40 billion on health and education over the next three years, and will double net public investment.

The Government's prudent approach to managing the public finances ensures that these commitments will be honoured while meeting the Government's two strict fiscal rules.

Public Services Expenditure

20. **Mr. Win Griffiths:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his plans to increase non-capital expenditure on public services over the next three years. [61766]

Mr. Byers: Spending plans for the next three years were set out in the Comprehensive Spending Review White Paper, published in July.

Work Incentives

22. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about his policy to increase the incentive to work. [61768]

Dawn Primarolo: The Budget contained a number of measures to help ensure that work pays, including the Working Families Tax Credit and reform to National Insurance Contributions. These changes will ensure a guaranteed minimum income of at least £190 a week for working families. And, as the Pre-Budget Report stated, we will also introduce a 10p starting rate of income tax, when it is economically right to do so. In addition, the Welfare to Work programme will, through the New Deal, help people to make the move from welfare into work.

Tax Revenue Statistics

23. **Sir Teddy Taylor:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the latest estimate of total annual tax revenue per person in the United Kingdom; and what was the total *(a)* five and *(b)* 10 years ago. [61769]

Mr. Byers: Figures for the total annual tax revenue per person in the United Kingdom were £2,812 in 1987–88; £3,574 in 1992–93; and £5,023 in 1997–98.

Pensioners (Taxation)

24. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the taxation of dividends paid to non-taxpaying low-income pensioners. [61770]

Dawn Primarolo: Having listened carefully to all interested parties, the Government confirm the arrangements set out in the July 1997 Budget for phasing out payable credits in order to correct a bias in the tax system against the retention of profits for investment. Individuals have time to consider their investments before the new rules take effect—for example, they can move to tax-favoured investments should they wish to do so.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he is proposing to improve the tax position of pensioners. [61778]

Ms Hewitt: In his statement to the House on the Comprehensive Spending Review, 14 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns 187–211, the Chancellor announced that, as part of a £2.5 billion package of support for pensioners, the Government would set a minimum tax guarantee, so that no pensioner would pay income tax unless their income rose above a specified level. The pre-Budget report confirmed that this level would be determined in the next Budget.

Duty-free Sales

25. **Miss McIntosh:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received on the continuation of duty-free sales after 30 June 1999; what transitional measures he proposes to introduce; and if he will make a statement. [61771]

Dawn Primarolo: I have received a number of representations on the continuation of duty-free sales after 30 June 1999. This matter was discussed at the ECOFIN Council meeting on 1 December where a minority of Member States, supported by the UK, called for a fresh look at the decision to end intra-EU duty free sales on 30 June 1999. However, unanimity amongst Member States is required and there was no consensus for change. The Government are continuing to consider the arrangements which should apply after 30 June 1999.

Euro

26. **Mr. Townend:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the cost to the United Kingdom Government of conversion from sterling to the euro. [61772]

Ms Hewitt: The cost of the changeover should the UK decide to join the euro would depend on the manner in which businesses and other organisations were to approach the changeover and the extent to which organisations had incorporated euro compatibility into investment decisions before joining.

ECOFIN

28. **Mr. Boswell:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what recent consultations he has had with his European Union counterparts on the co-ordination of taxation policies. [61774]

30. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with EU finance ministers on the subject of EU tax harmonisation. [61776]

Mr. Hood: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what was the outcome of the ECOFIN Council held in Brussels on 1 December; and if he will make a statement. [62329]

Dawn Primarolo: The Chancellor attended the Economic and Finance Council—ECOFIN—of the European Union in Brussels on 1 December. I accompanied him. ECOFIN was followed by a joint meeting of ECOFIN and the Social Affairs Council.

I, as Chair of the Code of Conduct Group, presented the Group's first interim report to ECOFIN. The Council took note of the report, endorsed the further work and asked the Group to endeavour to complete its work as rapidly as possible. Commissioner Monti gave a brief presentation of the Commission's combined first annual report on the implementation of the Code of Conduct for Business Taxation and fiscal state aid and a progress report on the work concerning the taxation of income from savings and a common system of taxation from interest and royalty payments between associated companies.

The Council noted a presentation by Commissioner Van Miert on the Commission's Communication on the application of state aid rules to direct tax measures.

The Commission put forward a draft mandate for a study on company taxation which was not agreed.

Commissioner Monti requested that ECOFIN consent to the Commission and the Presidency Troika initiating exploratory talks with third countries on the external dimension of the taxation of savings. ECOFIN agreed the mandate.

The Presidency proposed that the Financial Questions Group continue its discussions on a framework for energy taxation based on the Commission's draft Energy Products Directive. This was agreed by the Council, with a view to the Council being able to assess the prospects for such a framework by May 1999.

The Presidency put forward a draft progress report entitled "Reinforced tax policy co-operation". The agreed report will be submitted to the Vienna European Council.

The Council agreed a report to the Vienna European Council on Agenda 2000.

ECOFIN discussed the Stability Programme of the Netherlands and the Convergence Programme of Denmark. The Council adopted opinions on these programmes.

ECOFIN agreed that the Commission would adopt on 9 December a proposal that allowed for only very limited access for credit institutions in Monaco to the French payments system. France is to discuss this measure further with the European Central Bank and the Commission.

The Council agreed a report to the European Council on the external representation of the euro area. The Council also agreed a report taking forward initiatives to reform the international financial institutions.

The composition and statutes of the Economic and Financial Committee were agreed.

ECOFIN agreed a statement on facilitating the reconstruction efforts in Central America following Hurricane Mitch.

The abolition of intra-EU duty free shopping on 30 June 1999 was raised. Several Member States asked that this decision be looked at again. The request did not achieve the necessary unanimous support of Member States. The Presidency concluded that no further action would be taken.

At the joint meeting of ECOFIN and the Social Affairs Council, agreement was reached on the Joint Employment Report and on amendments to the 1999 Employment Guidelines. Both texts will be sent to the Vienna European Council. The Chairman of the European Investment Bank gave a report on the progress made in implementing the programme agreed at the Luxembourg jobs summit.

European Economy

31. **Mr. Alan W. Williams:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on progress toward the co-ordinated expansion of the European economy. [61777]

Ms Hewitt: Articles 103 and 104c of the Maastricht Treaty provide a basis for coordination and surveillance of budgetary and economic policies in EMU. The Government believe that growth and high employment in the EU will be best served by policies which promote economic stability and improve the performance of labour, product and capital markets. As part of this process, Member States are currently submitting Progress Reports on Product and Capital Markets which will be discussed in the new year.

Balance of Payments

32. **Mr. Spring:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the balance of payments. [61779]

Ms Hewitt: A small current account deficit is expected this year, and the Pre-Budget Report shows that, as a proportion of GDP, it is forecast to remain modest by historical standards over the next few years.

VAT Village Halls

33. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on his policy with regard to VAT reclamation by parish councils on building projects undertaken by village hall committees. [61780]

Dawn Primarolo: A parish council is not entitled to recover VAT incurred by a village hall committee. However, where a parish council owns, or is the sole trustee of, a hall and it incurs VAT in respect of works to the hall, this is normally recoverable. In addition, VAT may be recoverable where a parish council uses its own resources to undertake work to other halls.

Economic Stability

34. **Dr. Desmond Turner:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what measures he has taken to ensure economic stability. [61781]

Ms Hewitt: We have put in place new frameworks for monetary and fiscal policy, and have taken tough action to deliver low inflation and sound public finances. These are essential for economic stability and sustainable growth.

Pension Mis-selling

36. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about the role of independent financial advisers in respect of pension mis-selling. [61783]

Ms Hewitt: I refer the hon. Gentleman to my statement of 5 November 1998, *Official Report*, column 685.

Monetary Policy Committee

Dr. Lynne Jones: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the Monetary Policy Committee. [61767]

Ms Hewitt: The task of the Monetary Policy Committee is to set short-term interest rates to meet the Government's inflation target. The success of the new monetary framework is demonstrated by the fact that inflation is at its target, long-term interest rates are currently at their lowest level for over 35 years and inflation expectations have fallen.

Debt Relief (Honduras and Nicaragua)

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what discussions he has had with the Governments of Honduras and Nicaragua regarding debt relief; what steps he has taken to secure debt relief for those countries; and if he will make a statement. [61773]

Ms Hewitt: The UK has already written off all of its aid loans to Honduras and Nicaragua. Last month, the Chancellor and Secretary of State for International Development called on the International Financial Institutions to look at mechanisms that could mitigate the debt service burdens on Honduras and Nicaragua and announced a £10 million contribution to a multilateral Trust Fund to help meet debt service payments to the IMF and World Bank.

Employment Statistics

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the quarterly levels and changes in the United Kingdom employed labour force since 1990, identifying separately *(a)* employees in employment, *(b)* armed forces and *(c)* self-employment, with a breakdown of these categories by (i) full-time and part-time and (ii) sex. [62308]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Mike Hancock, dated 10 December 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the labour force.

The statistics you have requested (where available) can be accessed via the Central Shared Database (CSDB) in the House of Commons Library.

Figures for males and females are available for Employee jobs (the new name for employees-in-employment), Self-employment jobs and HM Forces in the United Kingdom. However, a full-time and part-time breakdown is only available for the Employee jobs component, and only from December 1992.

When accessing the database you will need to know the CSDB 'identifiers' for each of the series of figures sought. These are as follows:

Male Full-time Employee jobs: YEJN

Male Part-time Employee jobs: YEJO

Female Full-time Employee jobs: YEJP

Female Part-time Employee jobs: YEJQ

Male Self-employment jobs: YEJR

Female Self-employment jobs: YEJS

Male HM Forces: YEJT

Female HM Forces: YEJU

These estimates are subject to revision after 16th December 1998, when the short-term estimates will be benchmarked against the Annual Employment Survey (AES) results for September 1997. You may also wish to know that these figures are published in table B.11 of *Labour Market Trends* each month—copies of which are placed in the House Library.

Registration (Births, Deaths and Marriages)

Mr. Fallon: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the options paper on registration of Births, Deaths and Marriages will be presented by the Registrar General to Ministers, as stated in his written answer to the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr. Robertson) of 30 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *175*, and when he expects to publish proposals for reform. [62552]

Ms Hewitt: The Registrar General expects to present the options paper to Ministers shortly.

Proposals for reform will be included in the consultation document arising from the Civil Registration review announced in the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *27–28*.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what the average weekly gains from the introduction of the working families tax credit will be by decile of *(a)* benefit unit income and *(b)* household income. [62244]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* The table shows estimated average gains arising from the introduction of Working Families Tax Credit for those eligible for the credit. The overall average gain including childcare costs is estimated to be £17.20 per week. Individual decile gains do not include gains arising from the changes to the treatment of childcare costs in Working Families Tax Credit or other behavioural changes arising from the introduction of the credit, as they can not be reliably apportioned across deciles.

Average gain of gainers from introduction of Working Families Tax Credit by decile

£ per week

Decile	*Benefit unit income*	*Household income*
Lowest	[1]—	14.40
2nd	17.40	18.60
3rd	16.10	12.40
4th	12.20	15.20
5th	14.90	12.60
6th	12.00	[1]—
7th	[1]—	[1]—
8th	[1]—	[1]—
9th	[1]—	[1]—
Highest	[1]—	[1]—

[1] No gainers or number of gainers too few to calculate reliable estimate of average gain

Note:
Deciles are defined in terms of equivalised income on a benefit unit and household income basis using the McClements scale; decile boundaries are higher for households than benefit units.

Source:
These estimates have been derived from projections of Family Expenditure Survey data to 1999–2000

Revised Earnings Index

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which sectors of the workforce were re-allocated between the public and private sectors of the economy in the now suspended revised earnings index. [62905]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 10 December 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the public and private sectors of the economy in the now suspended revised earnings index.

Reclassification mainly affected privatised parts of public transport. The introduction of legal status rather than nature of business led to a very small number of reclassifications of individual enterprises. Confidentiality restrictions prevent me from naming these.

Vehicle Excise Duty

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many vehicles qualified for the exemption from vehicle excise duty for historic and classic cars in each of the last 10 years. [62691]

Ms Hewitt: The exemption for vehicles over 25 years of age dates from November 1995.

Thousand

Year	*Exempt: Tax class 88 vehicles*	*All vehicles*	*Cars*
1995[1]	over 25 years of age	120.0	90.8
1996[1]	over 25 years of age	278.4	173.3
1997[1]	built before 1 January 1973	325.7	203.4
1998[2]	built before 1 January 1973	337.7	208.8

[1] At year end
[2] At end of June 1998

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62830]

Ms Hewitt: At present, 13 staff in the Treasury and the Debt Management Office are on secondment from private companies. Details of the seconding authorities and the secondees' Departmental responsibilities are shown in the table. It is our normal policy not to disclose the names of individual officials.

Details of private sector firms currently seconding staff to HM Treasury and staffs' responsibilities as at 1 December 1998

Seconding organisation	*Responsibilities*
Barclays Capital	Export and export credits policy and oversight of the Export Credits Guarantee Department.
Midland Bank	Provision of advice and guidance on small and medium sized enterprises; business associations and representative bodies; business links and other intermediaries.
Tarmac plc	Private Finance Initiative (PFI) Adviser in the Procurement Group with responsibility for: links between PFI and mainstream procurement; support to departmental Procurement Units on PFI issues; and support to Treasury led Taskforce on procurement issues.
Pannell Kerr Forster Associates	Provision of commercial, financial and accounting advice on private sector companies, and public and private sector commercial undertakings. Support to other work areas in the Treasury, as well as support to OFGAS, OFFER, OFTEL and OFT.
Ernst & Young	Developing policy on aspects of public private partnerships, including the guidance on selling services into wider markets and on parts of the Treasury's on-going work on productivity.
Manpower plc	Provision of advice and guidance on strategic issues relating to supply chain management, electronic commerce and procurement business plans, to central Government Departments and Treasury officials.
Securities Investment Board	Deals with money laundering, financial crime and subjects in the wider area of regulatory policy.
PricewaterhouseCoopers	Provision of economic advice on housing and urban regeneration planning policies and programmes. Works on social exclusion.

Details of private sector firms currently seconding staff to HM Treasury and staffs' responsibilities as at 1 December 1998

Seconding organisation	*Responsibilities*
Arthur Andersen	Provides policy support where necessary to the leading Department on the Public-Private Partnerships for National Air Traffic Services (NATS) and the London Underground. Maintains Treasury interests on the completion of the Jubilee Line extension and oversees progress on the Belfast Port Public/Private Partnership.
PricewaterhouseCoopers	Monitoring and control of expenditure commitments in relation to PFI; assurances of funding and other expenditure issues; value for money/public sector comparators; management and measurement of risk; payment mechanisms; tax and accounting matters; reduction of bid costs; international interest including liaison with international financial institutions.
Arthur Andersen	Provides advice and guidance on corporation and capital tax policy issues.
Arthur Andersen	Encourages enterprise and economic growth in industry.
PricewaterhouseCoopers	Provision of accountancy advice and guidance to the Treasury, including accounting implications of PFI projects.

Charity Tax Review

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Government expect to conclude their review of charity taxation; and if he will make a statement. [62907]

Ms Hewitt: The Government received over 3,000 replies in the first phase of the Review and are determined to consider carefully all the options before launching the next phase. We intend to publish a Consultation Document as soon as possible.

EU Budget

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what *(a)* amount and *(b)* proportion of revenues raised by VAT have been earmarked for financing the EU budget. [63099]

Dawn Primarolo: The latest estimate for the gross UK VAT contribution to the EU budget is £4,034 million in 1998–99. The amount paid is related to a notional harmonised VAT base, covering the same goods and services in all EU member states, and is not directly proportional to VAT revenues raised in the UK. UK VAT revenues are forecast to be £52.6 billion in 1998–99.

Informal Economy

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimate he has made of the size as a proportion of gross domestic product of the informal economy *(a)* in the United Kingdom, *(b)* in each region and *(c)* in each nation; and what assessment he has made of trends in the size of the informal economy. [62906]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 10 December 1998:

As Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent parliamentary question on the informal economy.

Definitions of what is included in the informal economy are not entirely clear, and therefore no official estimates are available for the UK. However, the ONS has done work based on the following three definitions:

The UN System of National Accounts 1993 (SNA93) defines the informal sector as comprising own-account enterprises (household enterprises owned and operated by own-account workers, which may employ contributing family workers and employees on an occasional basis) and enterprises of informal employers (who operate below a certain size or are unregistered). The SNA says that the concept of informal sector activities should be distinguished from the concept of activities of the hidden or underground economy.

In the context of household satellite accounts, 'movement between the formal and informal economy' is movement between the economy measured by GDP and unpaid household production.

Illegal economic activities are also sometimes described as 'informal'.

The activity of informal own-account enterprises, who are registered with the Inland Revenue, are included in National Accounts estimates of mixed income. Adjustments are made in the National Accounts to allow for the incomes of those who are not registered for income tax. However, this evasion adjustment does not claim to measure the total size of the 'hidden economy'. Section 14.20–24 from the *1998 National Accounts Concepts, Sources and Methods* describes these adjustments, and I enclose a copy of this. Estimates for the value of household production were published in October 1997, based on Time Use data from 1995—a copy of the article is enclosed. The results of some research into the illegal economy were published in Economic Trends in July 1998—a copy of that article is also enclosed.

There is no regional or sub-national breakdown for any of these data. Because much of the work is developmental, there are no time series, so it is not possible to assess the rate and direction of any change.

Euro Preparations Committee

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list those members of the House who have been nominated to date for membership of the new Euro Preparations Committee; and if he will make a statement. [62281]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* My right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer wrote to the Treasury spokesmen of each Parliamentary Party on 10 November inviting nominations for representatives for the new Cross-Party Advisory Group on preparations for the euro.

To date, the right hon. Member for Haltemprice and Howden (Mr. Davis) and the hon. Members for Twickenham (Dr. Cable) and for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) have been nominated for membership.

Given the importance of preparations for the euro, I hope that every Parliamentary Party will wish to be represented on the Group.

Company Cars

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make it his policy to reform company car taxation so as to remove the incentive to increase business mileage. [62423]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* The Chancellor announced in the March Budget that he would be considering, in relation to income tax charged on company cars, the case for replacing the existing business mileage discounts with discounts for driving fewer private miles. People were invited (Budget 98 Press Release Inland Revenue 6) to send comments to the Inland Revenue. As stated in the Pre-Budget Report (paragraphs 5.52 to 5.54), in the light of the views expressed, we are continuing to review how the company car tax regime might be altered to send better environmental signals.

Community Finance Initiatives

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans his Department has *(a)* to encourage the growth of community finance initiatives to promote regeneration in poorer areas and *(b)* to ask banks to disclose information on their servicing of poorer areas. [62284]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* As part of the Government's Social Exclusion agenda, I have established two Policy Action Teams looking at 1) Business and 2) Access to Financial Services in poorer neighbourhoods, which are due to report in July 1999. As part of its remit, the team looking at Business will consider a wide range of methods to improve the availability of finance for small and start-up businesses in deprived areas. The Access to Financial Services team will also consider the service banks provide to customers in poorer areas and consider with the Banks possible measures for improvement.

Tax Receipts

Mr. Jack: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the taxes in respect of which he receives monthly estimates of receipts from the Inland Revenue. [61762]

Dawn Primarolo: Monthly receipts of taxes collected by the Inland Revenue are published in the monthly "Public Sector Finances First Release". Forecasts of receipts are published in the "Financial Statement and Budget Report" and in the "Pre-Budget Report".

VAT (Tourism)

Mr. Gordon Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress HM Customs and Excise has made on its assessment of the recent British Tourist Authority report on the implication of a reduced VAT rate on hotel accommodation and other tourism-related services. [61757]

Dawn Primarolo: Customs have just completed their analysis of this detailed report and will shortly report to me with their findings.

Written Answers to Questions

Monday 14 December 1998

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Council Tax

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will place in the Library a table showing the Band D council tax increase for each (i) billing authority and (ii) notifiable authority in England, *(a)* in cash terms and *(b)* in percentage terms, based on the assumption that all councils apply his 1998–99 capping principles and spend up to the limit that would imply; [62853]

(2) if he will place in the Library a table showing the Band D council tax increase for each (i) billing authority and (ii) notifiable authority in England, (1) without applying council tax benefit limitation and (2) showing the extra increase that would arise from council tax benefit limitation *(a)* in cash terms and *(b)* in percentage terms, based on the assumption that all councils apply his 1998–99 capping principles and spend up to the limit that would imply. [62854]

Ms Armstrong *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* I have today placed in the Library of the House tables showing the information requested. The figures are entirely speculative. Councils will each take their own decision about their budget requirements for 1999–2000, in the light of the substantial increases in funding announced on 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 883–86. Each will look at its own circumstances and consider very hard the need for any council tax increase at all. There is no reason for the capping principles used in 1998–99 to be part of a council's budgeting decisions. The figures for some councils are particularly distorted by an assumption that they would increase their spending up to SSA even where they have in the past consistently spent below that level.

Local Government Finance (Essex)

Mr. Pickles: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions for what reasons Government grant support for Brentwood Borough and Epping Forest District Councils is to decline in the next financial year. [63041]

Ms Armstrong: Brentwood Borough Council and Epping Forest District Councils will receive central support reduction grant for 1999–2000. This ensures that their income from redistributed non-domestic rates and central government support under various grants to be paid for 1999–2000 will not be less than the income from redistributed non-domestic rates and various grants payable to them for 1998–99.

Both local authorities will, however, face a reduction in revenue support grant (RSG) for 1999–2000.

The main reason for the reduction is RSG for Brentwood Borough Council in 1999–2000 is the change to the method of calculating the element of the Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs) for local authorities' own expenditure on Flood Defence. The calculation is to be based on outturn expenditure instead of budgeted expenditure. Brentwood's budgeted expenditure has been substantially greater than what it has actually spent on flood defence. Other reasons include the adjustment of Capital Financing national totals to allow for the effect of reserved receipts on financing costs and a decrease in the values of some of the indicators used in the calculation of the 'District services' element of the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services SSA.

The main reason for the reduction in RSG for Epping Forest District Council in 1999–2000 is the adjustment of Capital Financing national totals to allow for the effect of reserved receipts on financing costs. Other reasons include a decline in its assumed level of debt, and a decrease in the values of some of the indicators used in the calculation of the 'District services' element of the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services SSA.

Road Accidents (Tranquillisers)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what research his Department has *(a)* commissioned and *(b)* evaluated on the number of road (i) deaths and (ii) accidents each year which would not occur if people taking tranquillisers did not drive. [62685]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is presently conducting a three-year survey, which started in October 1996, into the incidence of drugs (legal or illegal) in fatal road accident victims. A report on interim results to 7 January 1998 was published on 11 February 1998. My written answer of that date, *Official Report*, column *233*, explained that a copy was being placed in the Library.

This survey will not provide evidence of accident causation but it will help to establish the extent of drug use among road users. the interim results show that medicinal drugs were present in some 6 per cent. of road accident fatalities (drivers, passengers, pedestrians, cyclists).

Retail Outlets

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given to county councils on the setting up of retail outlets; and if he will make a statement. [63315]

Mr. Raynsford: Government policy on town centres and retail development is set out in Planning Policy Guidance note 6.

Night Flights

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the percentage of night flights at Gatwick by QC4 and QC8 aircraft *(a)* between October 1993 and September 1994 and *(b)* for the latest available 12 month period. [63456]

Ms Glenda Jackson: 8,651 night flights were counted against the noise quotas and movement limits in the period 24 October 1993 to 23 October 1994, of which 4 were by aircraft classified QC/8 and 420 (4.85 per cent.) were by aircraft classified QC/4.

11,470 night flights were counted against the noise quotas and movement limits in the period 26 October 1997 to 24 October 1998, of which one was by an aircraft classified QC/8 and 731 (6.37 per cent.) were by aircraft classified QC/4. The figures included in the above for the summer 1998 season are provisional.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many night flights were permitted at Heathrow and Gatwick airports in the year October 1992 to September 1993; and how many are due to be permitted in the year October 1998 to September 1999. [63454]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Prior to 24 October 1993, night flights at Heathrow and Gatwick were restricted on the basis of movements quotas. Since then, the night restrictions have been based on a system of movements limits and noise quotas. The night restrictions have always been set on a seasonal basis and details are available on that basis. The seasons change with the clocks.

The number of night flights permitted under the relevant restrictions in Winter 1992–93 (October-March) and Summer 1993 (March-October) were as follows:

Airport	*Winter 1992–93*	*Summer 1993*	*Total*
Gatwick			
Delayed Departures[1]	20	30	50
NN/B[2]	815	1,780	2,595
NN/C	1,542	3,410	4,952
Total	2,377	5,220	7,597
Heathrow			
Delayed Departures	30	60	90
NN/B and NN/C	3,000	2,750	5,750
Total	3,030	2,810	5,840

[1] Prior to October 1993, aircraft were classified into four groups depending on their noise performance on take-off. The noisiest types, NN/A, could not normally operate at night, apart from a small quota for delayed aircraft.

[2] At Gatwick, the movement quotas were subdivided between NN/B and NN/C aircraft as a further control on the number of take-offs and landings by the next noisiest types of aircraft. The movement quotas at Heathrow were not subdivided in this way but NN/B aircraft were barred from taking off between 0030—0500.

The number of night flights permitted under the relevant restrictions in Winter 1998–99 (October-March) and Summer 1999 (March-October) are as follows:

	Season		
Airport	*Winter 1998–99*	*Summer 1999*	*Total*
Gatwick			
Movements Limit	5,250	11,200	16,450
Noise Quota	6,820	9,550	16,370
Heathrow			
Movements Limit	2,550	3,250	5,800
Noise Quota	5,000	7,000	12,000

The current restrictions comprise a maximum number of movements which can be made each season with a quota, related to an aircraft's noise classification on take-off or landing, as a supplementary measure designed to encourage the use of quieter aircraft. Each aircraft (landing or take-off) counts as one against the movement limit; it also counts against the noise quota according to its noise quota classification.

Both night restrictions regimes additionally permit movements by exempt types of aircraft, although far fewer types of aircraft are exempt under the present regime than previously. Both night restrictions regimes also include provisions for some movements to be given dispensations. The latest guidelines on dispensations were published in the second stage consultation paper on Night Restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted, which was announced on 17 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *492–93*.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the effect of the night flight noise point quota system at Gatwick in encouraging the use of quieter aircraft. [63457]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This is considered in the second stage of the consultation on Night Restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted issued on 17 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *492–93*.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what were the number of night noise quota points used at Gatwick Airport *(a)* between October 1993 and September 1994 and *(b)* in the latest available 12 month period; and to what extent the number of noise quota points used is proportional to the volume of noise at night. [63455]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Since October 1993 the night noise quotas set for Gatwick Airport have been 6,820 quota count (QC) points for each winter season and 9,550 QC points for each summer season, making an annual total of 16,370 QC points. The usage made of these quotas in the periods 24 October 1993 and 23 October 1994 inclusive was 8963.5 points; and that in the period 26 October 1997 and 25 October 1998 inclusive was 12413 points.

The figures included in the above for the summer 1998 season are provisional.

For the purposes of the night restrictions, aircraft are classified into seven QC bands, in most cases according to the noise certification data collected when the aircraft was tested to show that it met the internationally agreed noise levels. The metric EPNL (Effective Perceived Noise Level) is used for noise certification purposes, and each aircraft, depending on the engines fitted, is classified into one of seven 3EPNdB-wide QC bands. They are classified separately for take-off and landing. Therefore, the number of quota points used is proportional to the volume of noise according to the following scale.

Quota Count	Noise Classification
QC/0	less than 87 EPNdB, but in the case of jet aircraft, those having a maximum certificate take-off weight not exceeding 11,600kg.
QC/0.5	90–92.9 EPNdB
QC/1	90–92.9 EPNdB
QC/2	93–95.9 EPNdB
QC/4	96–98.9 EPNdB
QC/8	99–101.9 EPNdB
QC/16	Greater than 101.9 EPNdB

Aircraft (Disabled Access)

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures he has taken to ensure that all aircraft in public service are accessible to people with disabilities. [63397]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department is leading discussions at European level to draw up common standards of access to air services for disabled people. We are also involved in similar discussions at the International level.

With our statutory advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee, and the Access to the Skies Committee, we are working too with the air industry in this country, to improve their understanding of the needs of disabled people and to encourage better provision of facilities to meet those needs.

Channel Tunnel—Liverpool Link

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the new proposals from Central Railway for opening a railway line between Liverpool and the Channel Tunnel. [63475]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Ministers have seen only the consultation documents which Central Railway recently issued. We have therefore not taken a view on the scheme.

Brown-field Sites

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his Department's definition of brown-field sites. [63615]

Mr. Raynsford: There is no specific definition of "brownfield" land. However, it is usually taken to mean land previously developed for 'urban' uses. For statistical purposes, as defined by the Department's Land Use Change Statistics, "previously-developed urban" uses include residential, transport and utilities, industry and commerce, community services, previously-developed vacant land and derelict land. Land is classified according to its use and not its location, therefore the 'urban' use can occur in rural areas.

Information on land that may be available for redevelopment is currently being collected in order to compile the first phase of the National Land Use Database. The scope of this is wider than the definition of previously-developed land used in Land Use Change Statistics.

Open-top Sightseeing Buses (London)

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the number of open-top sightseeing buses operating in London per day and of the average payload per bus in each of the last 12 months. [63682]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not held centrally.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Gardiner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide a breakdown of the changes to the criteria for calculating the other education SSA block in the local government settlements for 1999–2000. [63830]

Ms Armstrong: The national total for the Other Education SSA for 1999–2000 has been decided in consultation with the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. The same indicators are used to distribute the other education SSA in 1999–2000 as were used in 1998–99. The unit costs for each indicator have been adjusted to take account of rescaling the unit costs to reflect the overall total of other education SSA for 1999–2000 and any updating of the data used in the calculations. In addition, a small correction has been made to the population data for 1991 used in the underlying statistical analyses.

A14 (Cambridgeshire)

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from national motorway and road haulage organisations concerning the A14 in Cambridgeshire; and if he will make a statement. [63527]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We consulted very widely on our Integrated Transport Policy and Review of Trunk Roads and received a large number of comments. Organisations at national, regional and local level made it clear the problems in the Cambridge-Huntingdon area were very severe and the need for solutions was seen as a very high priority.

John Bridge, Chairman of the Road Haulage Association, met with the Highways Agency's Chief Executive, Lawrie Haynes, and John Pearman, the Area Manager, on 8 September to press the case for an early start to the multi-modal A14 study.

Improvements to the A14 north of Cambridge were withdrawn by the previous administration and proposed improvements between the M11, Junction 14 and the A1/A14 junction had not even reached public consultation stage so they were not contenders for the Targeted Investment Programme that we announced in July. We are proposing to carry out a multi-modal study of the Cambridge-Huntingdon Corridor to bring forward a comprehensive solution to the problems including looking at the potential for transfer of traffic on to other modes. Confirmation of this study was given last week and a provisional date for its start is 2000–01; this timing, as with the timing of all multi-modal studies arising from the roads review, is subject to progress on consultation with the regional planning conference.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what reports he has received from the Highways Agency concerning recent fatal accidents on the A14 in Cambridgeshire; and if he will make a statement. [63529]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Highways Agency has the facts available on all personal injury accidents. There is in place a system of reporting the most serious incidents to Ministers. The recent fatal accident reported on this basis covers the accident at Lolworth on 18 November.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will institute contingency plans for the design and routing of an upgrade of the A14 in Cambridgeshire, pending the outcome of multi-modal study for that traffic corridor. [63526]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Secretary of State has a statutory duty to review the needs of the network. We have already identified a number of safety related improvements for the Huntingdon to Cambridge section of the A14 which stem from a specific earlier study exercise. The Highways Agency will be implementing these measures by the Spring of 1999.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has held with the standing conference of East Anglian local authorities on terms of reference for a multi-modal study of the A14 corridor in Cambridgeshire. [63530]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government Office of the Eastern Region is working closely with the Standing Conference of East Anglian Local Authorities (SCEALA) on the technical work leading to the public exhibition of the Draft Regional Planning Guidance for East Anglia, which takes place in February. On 10 December we published our formal consultation with the Regional planning conference on the study programme announced in "A New Deal for Trunk Roads in England". This consultation seeks the Conference's views on the timing, coverage, and scope of the studies. The consultation paper proposes that the Cambridge-Huntingdon study should fall in the second tranche of multi-modal studies. There is a wide range of issues in the corridor including congestion, safety, environment, possible road, bus and rail proposals as well as proposals for significant development that will have to form part of any broad assessment of potential transport solutions.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what safety improvements on the A14 in Cambridgeshire have been commissioned by the Highways Agency. [63535]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The whole of the A14 (from M6 to Felixstowe) is being considered as an integral route. As part of that a package of measures along the length of the A14 in Cambridgeshire is being progressed:

West of A1 conversion of four existing single level junctions to two level;

Between Huntingdon and Cambridge—package of safety measures as described in my answer today to PQ63531, at column *314*;

between Cambridge and Newmarket—package of safety measures as described in my answer today to PQ63531, at column *314*.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies he has evaluated concerning the potential for improvements in safety on the A14 in Cambridgeshire; and what action he proposes to take on those studies. [63531]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Studies and improvements can be broken down into three distinct lengths, working from east to west as follows:

(a) The Highways Agency is carrying out studies to identify what safety improvements can be made to the Histon (B1049) and Milton (A10) interchanges north of Cambridge. As an interim measure, the Agency is providing 'queue warning signs' on both carriageways of the trunk road approaching each junction. The signs will be in place by the end of January 1999.

(b) In 1995 a study was commissioned from consulting engineers, Thorburn Colquhoun, to investigate accidents and congestion on the A14 between Huntingdon and Cambridge. This study suggested measures that could be taken to improve safety on the A14. The first stage of these improvements was carried out in 1995–96 when speed cameras were provided to help reduce traffic speeds. Since that time, and from that study, the Highways Agency has further developed a strategy of safety related improvement measures which will shortly be implemented. These focus on particular problems at specific locations which will be carried out by Spring 1999:

(i) Improvement to various junctions by small scale widening, replacing existing chevrons with yellow backed signs, install bend warning signs with advisory speed limits, laying anti-skid at the ends of the diverge tapers and providing countdown markers on the approaches to the diverge tapers;

(ii) Improvements within Girton Interchange to improve lane discipline and the flow of traffic;

(iii) The construction of an acceleration lane to Hemingford Abbots eastbound carriageway.

(c) Further studies are already in place to look at additional safety improvements at various locations;

(d) Schemes are being prepared to change four existing single level junctions to two level between Thrapston and Brampton. They comprise the provision of bridges with full connections to the A14 at Polopit Road, the B663, Leighton Bromswold and Wooley/Easton junctions together with an overbridge at Chainbridge Lane. The Little Meadow crossing will be closed and alternative access arrangements for land and property owners made. All other central reserve gaps will be closed and the present footpath/bridleway crossing diverted to the proposed structures. All direct access points will be closed and alternative means of access put in place.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what increase in *(a)* noise and *(b)* pollutant emissions has occurred along the A14 in the last five years. [63528]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No readings are available to determine the increase in noise and pollution.

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of the growth of *(a)* HGV traffic and *(b)* all road traffic on the A14 between Huntingdon and Cambridge in the last three years. [63533]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Over the last three years the total growth in traffic on this section of the A14 has been recorded as follows:

(a) HGV traffic—approximately 7.5 per cent.

(b) All vehicles—approximately 9.0 per cent.

Dual Carriageways (Traffic Levels)

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which two-lane dual carriageways in England, not of motorway standard, currently carry the highest levels of road traffic. [63532]

Ms Glenda Jackson: In 1997 the highest level of road traffic on non-motorway, two lane dual carriageways, in England, recorded as an Annual Average Daily Traffic (AADT) flow was 84,000 vehicles on the A1. From readily available records, the ten busiest sections are listed. Lengths of two lane dual carriageway less than 2.5km, which predominantly occur in Urban areas, have been excluded:

Road	*Location*	*Road class*	*AADT*
A1	Gateshead Western By-pass	Trunk	84,000
A1	Newcastle Western By-pass	Trunk	79,000
A27	Havant-Chichester	Trunk	75,000
A127	M25-Southend	Principal	72,000
A45	M1-Northampton	Principal	71,000
A66	Darlington-Middlesborough	Principal	67,000
A14	Hungtingdon-Cambridge	Trunk	66,000
A23	Brighton-Crawley	Trunk	65,000
A312	Hayes By-pass	Principal	61,000
A34	Oxford-Abingdon	Trunk	61,000

Public Refuse Incinerators

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance his Department has issued to local authorities regarding the siting of public refuse incinerators. [63410]

Mr. Raynsford: Government guidance on the siting of incinerators is included in Planning Policy Guidance note 23 "Planning and Pollution Control". This will be updated soon when Planning Policy Guidance note 10 "Planning and Waste Management" is published. the Department also issued a guidance note to local authorities in August, 1997, on the provision of incinerators in connection with the slaughter of cattle under the "Over Thirty Months Scheme".

Rail Services (Punctuality)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each train operating company the number of days in the last 12 months which the company excluded from its calculation of punctuality statistics on the ground that there was no effective service. [63419]

Ms Glenda Jackson: No days are excluded from the OPRAF incentive schemes on the grounds of failure to provide an effective service. Neither are days taken out of the OPRAF contractual enforcement regime governing the relationship with operators on these grounds.

However, the Passengers Charter allows for days to be declared "Void" in a particular Charter Group if no effective service is provided on a particular day. If this happens, season tickets of one month or more will be extended or similar compensation arranged. The OPRAF Bulletin includes punctuality statistics based on the Passenger Charter and from the next edition will include details of the number of void days. Currently void days are generally listed at stations on the Charter Performance Posters.

For the 12 months up to the end of Period 8 (14 November) the following days have been declared void.

	Total
Anglia Railways	
Mainline	5
Felixstowe	1
Cardiff Railway	17
Central Trains	
East Midlands	16
Inter-Urban	16
Mid Wales and Marches	16
Virgin Cross Country	28
Gatwick Express	11
Great Eastern	1
Great North Eastern Railway	5
Great Western Trains	27
Midland Mainline	6
North Western Trains (Inter-Urban only)	1
Silverlink (still subject to confirmation)	
County	20
Metro NLL	11
Metro Watford	8
South West Trains	
Main Line	6
Suburban	4
Thameslink	2
Wales and West	
Cornwall	2
Devon	2
South Cotswolds	2
West and Central Wales	2
Western Express	2
Avon	2
Virgin West Coast	
West Midlands	36
North West	37
Scotland	47

Notes:
Italic Type—Operator
Normal Type—Service Group

Local Authority Housing (Resource Accounting)

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to consult on the introduction of resource accounting for local authority housing. [64079]

Ms Armstrong: We will be publishing a consultation paper "A New Financial Framework for Local Authority Housing: Resource Accounting in the Housing Revenue Account" on 15 December, allowing until 19 March for comments. The statement on Housing and Regeneration Policy following the Comprehensive Spending Review, on 21 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *468*, made clear our intention that local authorities should take a more business-like approach to managing their housing. Local authority housing is a valuable asset. Introducing new-style housing revenue accounts based on a form of resource accounting is one of a number of proposals, including our plans to introduce a Best Value regime for local authorities, to modernise the approach to housing management and encourage greater tenant involvement.

The proposed new financial framework will show clearly the value of housing, the expenditure needed to maintain it and the subsidy required to keep rents below market levels.

Countryside (Public Access)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place copies of the responses to his consultation document on Access to the Open Countryside in England and Wales in the Library. [63784]

Mr. Meacher: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on 27 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *103*.

Rail Passengers (Illness)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many incidents of passengers being taken seriously ill on train journeys have occurred in each of the past five years. [63810]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The information requested is not collected by train operating companies.

Sellafield

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for further public consultation on the application by BNFL to operate its MOX plant at Sellafield. [63904]

Mr. Meale: I refer my hon. Friend to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment on 3 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *454*.

Oil Production (Safety)

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the relative risk of oil spillage from a production and distribution system using *(a)* floating production storage and offloading facilities and tankers to transport oil and *(b)* fixed production platforms and pipelines. [63087]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

The Licensing conditions and the Merchant Shipping (Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Co-operation Convention) Regulations which were implemented earlier this year require a risk-based assessment to be made of each offshore production facility prior to production taking place.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in what ways the emergency infrastructure is being modified to deal with a potential pollution incident in the Atlantic Frontier Region following the granting of licences for oil production there. [63053]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

The Merchant Shipping (Oil Pollution Preparedness, Response and Co-operation Convention) Regulations implemented in May this year require a risk-based assessment of any potential pollution incident before the operation can be carried out, regardless of where the operation is taking place.

Regional Development Agencies

Mr. McNulty: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will make an announcement about the membership of the boards of the regional development agencies. [64082]

Mr. Prescott: The board members of the eight Regional Development Agencies outside London will be as follows:

Eastern RDA

Vincent Watts (Chairman)
Sal Brinton
Alan Cherry
Peter Dawe
Greg Grant
Ken Lewis
Peter Martin
Chris Mole
Richard Powell
Neville Reyner
Jacqueline Russell
Marie Skinner
Stelio Stefanou

East Midlands RDA

Derek Mapp (Chairman)
Jane Bradford
Ted Cassidy
Graham Chapman
Martin Doughty
Peter Gadsby
Gillian Gardiner
Len Jackson
Bob Middleton
Peter Moore
Pat Morgan-Webb
Christine Wood

North East RDA

Dr. John Bridge (Chairman)
Alistair Arkley
Kevin Curran
Barbara Dennis
Professor Derek Fraser
Phillip Hughes
Richard Maudslay
John McCormack
Hugh Morgan-Williams
Miles Middleton
Rita Stringfellow
Sue Wilson
John Williams

North West RDA

Lord Thomas of Macclesfield (Chairman)
Maggie Chadwick
Mike Doyle
John Dunning

Felicity Goodey
Clive Jeanes
Richard Leese
Alan Manning
Dennis Mendoros
Kath Reade
Dr. Fred Ridley
Judy Robinson
James Ross

South East RDA
Allan Willett (Chairman)
Jim Baker
Ken Bodfish
Professor Clive Booth
Barry Camfield
Bryan Davies
Janis Kong
Russ [illegible]han
Winifred Oliver
David Rogers
Sarah Ward
Caroline Williams
Kevin Wilson

South West RDA
Sir Michael Lickiss (Chairman)
Doris Ansari
Cairns Boston
Ewen Cameron
Peter Chalke
Nigel Costley
Tudor Evans
Helen Holland
Michael Leece
Alfred Morris
Tim Parker
Stella Pirie
Jeremy Pope

West Midlands RDA
Alex Stephenson (Chairman)
Richard Barnes
Professor Kumar Bhattacharyya CBE
Michael Bird
Albert Bore
Sue Davis
Dr. Anthony Harris OBE
James Hunt
Professor Christine King
David Sparks
Sukvinder Stubbs
David Thompson
Brian Woods-Scawen

Yorkshire and Humber RDA
Graham Hall (Chairman)
Muriel Barker
Julian Cummins
Brian Greenwood
Richard Gregory
Lord Haskins
Stephen Houghton
Paul Jagger
Michael Johnston
Adeeba Malik
Sir Gareth Roberts
Paul Shepherd
Pamela Warhurst.

These boards fulfil the commitment we gave in our White Paper "Building Partnerships for Prosperity" to reflect an appropriate balance of regional interests. We have already announced that the boards will be led by chairmen with solid business backgrounds. As regards the main regional stakeholders, within each board business experience dominates; four members are drawn from local government reflecting a balance between type and size of authority, geographical spread and party balance; and at least one member on each board can offer a strong rural perspective together with others who have relevant rural experience. Each board also offers expertise from the field of education and the trades union movement and, across the country as a whole, the boards offer significant experience of the voluntary sector. The White Paper had envisaged boards of twelve but, while it has proved possible to constrain the potential size of the board by choosing members who can offer a range of expertise, we have decided that the full range of expertise necessary can only be achieved, at this stage, with boards of thirteen.

All boards will have at least three women—women represent about a quarter of the membership overall. This compares well with other business focused NDPBs. Ethnic minorities make up about 5 per cent. of the board membership.

I have today published a Departmental press release which gives biographical details of the board members. Copies have been placed in the Library.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Holding Centres (Lay Visitors)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland when she received a report on the outcome of consultations between the Police Authority and the Independent Commissioner for the Holding Centres on the role of lay visitors' access to suspects detained under emergency legislation; and if she will make a statement. [62263]

Mr. Ingram: The Secretary of State has received no such report. The Government did however consult on the Independent Commissioner's recommendation that Lay Visitors should have their sphere of operation extended to include the Holding Centres. It concluded that no change should be made to the remit of the Lay Visitors, not least because an extension of their role of the nature proposed might leave them open to duress and intimidation.

The Government look forward to the day when the Holding Centres are no longer needed. Meanwhile the Government do not envisage any merging of the roles of the Independent Commissioner and the Lay Visitors.

Prisoner Releases

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the prisoners who have been released under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 by *(a)* name, *(b)* organisation, *(c)* length of sentence actually served and *(d)* category of offence. [62941]

Mr. Ingram: On 8 December 1998 the total of prisoners who have been released under the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Sentences) Act 1998 has reached 221. Of those released, 68 are life sentence prisoners (36 loyalist, 29 republican and 3 others) and 153 fixed term prisoners (64 loyalist, 84 republican and 5 others).

The Northern Ireland Prison Service does not release the names or the perceived affiliation of individual prisoners. The category of offences committed could only be given at disproportionate cost.

Football

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what representations her Department has received from *(a)* the Association of Football Premier League and *(b)* Premier League clubs about basing a Premier League club in Belfast. [62693]

Mr. Paul Murphy: No representations have been received by my Department from either organisation.

Discussions are ongoing between officials and a private sector consortium, on the consortium's proposal to build a new sports stadium in Belfast, which could host a Premier League club. There has been no direct contact between officials and either the football authorities in England or any Premier League club.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many people in her Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if she will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62819]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information for the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland Departments is as follows:

Number	*Company*	*Current responsibilities within government*
2	British Telecom	Development of Electronic Service delivery
—	—	Special Adviser on Software Development
1	Capita Business Consultants	Industrial Accountancy
1	Helm Corporation Moore Stevens (Accountants)	Assisting Local Government Audit Branch with the completion of the statutory audits of local authority
1	Manufacturing and Technology Partnership	Green Economy—grant applications in Environmental Management Audit Scheme
2	Short Brothers PLC	Enhancing the continuous improvement unit's expertise in the drive to improve the level of take-up across the NICS and other customer organisations of self-assessment under the Business Excellence Model
—	—	Local Sourcing consultant

Victims of Violence

Mr. Thompson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps the Government will be taking to implement Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's recommendation that effective targeting of the special needs of victims of violence forms part of the Targeting Social Need objective (para. 5.17). [62686]

Mr. Ingram: As Minister with responsibility for Victims, I have established the Victims Liaison Unit to take forward implementation of the recommendations in Sir Kenneth Bloomfield's report. The Unit has just concluded a period of extensive consultation with victims, their families and their representatives on Sir Kenneth's recommendations. The responses to that consultation are now being considered and will inform the process of prioritising the next steps in addressing the needs identified in the report. I intend to make further announcements on the way forward in the New Year, once the outcome of the consultation exercise is known.

Mr. Thompson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the review of compensation arrangements will cover the treatment of relatives of people who were not financially contributing to a household. [62677]

Mr. Ingram *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The Review has been asked to advise the Government on the fitness for purpose of the criminal injuries compensation arrangements in Northern Ireland. It is for Sir Kenneth Bloomfield, who is chairing the Review, to decide precisely what needs to be examined to fulfil this wide-ranging remit. I understand, however, that the whole question of compensation for the relatives of victims is being looked at as part of the Review Body's deliberations on the future of criminal injuries compensation arrangements in Northern Ireland.

Housing

Mr. Beggs: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if the assessment of the responses to the housing policy review consultative document, Building on Success, has been completed; what further provision will be made relating to the safety and quality of houses in multiple occupancy in Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement. [63238]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The assessment of the responses to the Housing Policy Review conducted under the previous Government, was completed in early 1996. Decisions based on that assessment were published in July 1996, in

a document 'Building on Success—the Way Ahead'. With one exception, the decisions were subsequently endorsed by the present Government.

With specific reference to Houses in Multiple Occupation, it was proposed to monitor the introduction of the proposals in England and Wales, before considering the implications for Northern Ireland. That remains the case, in order to inform decision making by the Assembly, which will have responsibility for housing matters in future.

Mixed-sex Hospital Wards

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how many mental health hospitals or psychiatric units in Northern Ireland have mixed-sex wards; and if she will list them. [63788]

Mr. McFall: The following mental health hospitals and psychiatric units have mixed sex wards:

Hospitals	*Units*
Holywell, Antrim	Whiteabbey Hospital, Whiteabbey
Gransha, Londonderry	Ross Thompson Unit, Ballymoney
Tyrone and Fermanagh, Omagh	Ards Hospital, Newtownards
Downshire, Downpatrick	Belfast City Hospital, Belfast
St. Lukes, Armagh	Lagan Valley Hospital, Lisburn
	Mater Hospital, Belfast
	Craigavon Area Hospital, Craigavon

Northern Ireland Compact

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will make a statement on the launch of the Northern Ireland Compact. [64124]

Marjorie Mowlam: The Compact between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector in Northern Ireland will be laid before the House on Monday 14 December and launched the same day. It is a jointly-prepared, agreed statement of the general principles and the shared values which will govern the further development of the relationship between Government and the voluntary and community sector in Northern Ireland.

The Northern Ireland Compact complements recently launched sister Compacts in England, Scotland and Wales and fulfils another of the Government's pre-election commitments. It will cement a partnership based on shared values and mutual respect, enabling us better to identify and tackle needs, to strengthen communities and to build a more tolerant, participative, inclusive and peaceful society in Northern Ireland.

DEFENCE

Departmental Land, Lymington

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the future of his Department's land at Beckley Marsh, Lymington. [62774]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My Department has no record of any land holdings at Beckley Marsh and cannot identify the piece of land in question.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62822]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My Department is keen to build links with industry and commerce and believes the Whitehall-wide Interchange programme which encourages outward and inward secondment can assist this process. We encourage a range of options including non-executive advisory appointments to MOD boards, joint training, short attachments and secondments of three months or more. As at 1 December the MOD has twenty-one inward secondees from private companies as follows:

Name of secondee: (in alphabetical order)	*Name of private company from which seconded*	*Responsibilities on secondment*
Mr. Brian Bowden	Johnson Controls Calibration	Calibration Technician, DERA
Mr. David Bridge	Tarmac ServiceMaster Ltd.	Management of non-clinical services for The Health Alliance British Forces Germany
Mr. Stephen Cobb	British Aerospace plc	Supporting project work in the Directorate of Future Systems (Air)
Mr. Leslie Cooke	Johnson Controls Calibration	Calibration Technician, DERA
Mr. Stanley Dawes	Johnson Controls Calibration	Calibration Technician, DERA
Mr. Tony Edwards	TI Group plc	Head of Defence Export Services
Mr. James Evans	Johnson Controls Calibration	Manager and Head of Laboratory, DERA
Mr. Peter Farmer	British Aerospace plc	To assist with the development of the MOD's Continuous Acquisition & Life Cycle Support) (CALS) policy for the PE
Mr. Bruce Harmsworth	PA Consulting	Financial and Commercial adviser to the Procurement Executive Private Finance Unit
Mr. Steven Jones	Johnson Controls Calibration	Calibration Technician, DERA
Mr. Stephen Kenny	Wragge & Co.	Banking adviser to the Procurement Executive Private Finance Unit
Mr. Andrew Maltby	Devonport Royal Dockyard Ltd.	Project Manager in the Directorate of Nuclear Propulsion
Mr. John Martlew	Johnson Controls Calibration	Calibration Technician, DERA

Name of secondee: (in alphabetical order)	*Name of private company from which seconded*	*Responsibilities on secondment*
Sir Charles Masefield	British Aerospace plc	Head of Defence Export Services[1]
Mr. Christopher Miller	Johnson Controls Calibration	Technical Manager, DERA
Mr. Moolamkuhzhiel Nair	Post Office Support Services, Concept 2000	To deal with the advise on Intellectual Property Rights issues
Mr. Robert Potts	Rolls Royce Ltd.	To assist with the maintenance and monitoring of the Electric Ship Programme in the Ship Support Agency
Mr. David Scargill	Johnson Controls Calibration	Head of Laboratory, DERA
Mr. Paul Sharman	Johnson Controls Calibration	Technical Manager, DERA
Mr. Colin Shead	GEC Marconi Radar and Defence Systems	To develop and assist in the implementation of MOD's Continuous Acquisition & Life Cycle Support (CALS) Policy
Ms Miranda Voyle	Simmons & Simmons	To provide legal advice in the Commercial and Legal Section of the Procurement Executive's Private Finance Unit

[1] Sir Charles Masefield's appointment is due to end on 13 December 1998

Scammel Commander Tank Transporter

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the minimum number of axles permitted for United Kingdom civilian use under Category 3 of the authorisation of Special (General) Orders; if the Scammel Commander Military Transporter complies; and if Scammel Commander transporters carrying *(a)* Challenger I tanks and *(b)* Challenger II tanks are permitted to use public highways in the United Kingdom. [62083]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* The minimum number of axles permitted for United Kingdom civilian use under Category 3, Article 18, of the authorisation of Special (General) Orders is currently 6. The Scammel Commander Military Transporter has 5 axles but under the military exemption granted by Special Types (General) Orders Article 6, schedule 1, is permitted to carry challenger tanks on public highways in the United Kingdom.

Low-flying Aircraft

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the number of complaints from members of the public about low-flying military aircraft in England and Wales in each of the last three years. [63241]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The number of inquiries and complaints received from addresses in England and Wales about aircraft operating within the UK Low Flying System and recorded centrally are shown in the table.

Year	*England*	*Wales*
1996	4,290	908
1997	3,714	617
1998 (January-November)	3,512	545

Danish Tour Guide (Cyprus)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the British soldiers convicted of causing the death of the Danish tour guide in Cyprus have been dismissed from the Army; and if he will make a statement. [63264]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The three soldiers convicted of causing the death of the Danish Tour Guide in Cyprus were discharged on 22 April 1996 under paragraph 9.404 of Queen's Regulations for the Army for misconduct, having been sentenced by a Cypriot civilian court to imprisonment.

Gulf War Veterans

Dr. David Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to involve the National Regional Poison Centres in the medical assessments of veterans of the Gulf War and their families. [62957]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* Physicians at the MOD's Medical Assessment Programme (MAP) conduct a full medical examination, including a standard range of physical tests, on Gulf veterans who are referred there. Additional tests or referrals to other consultants or specialists may be required on a case by case basis. In these circumstances, MAP patients are sent for further tests or referrals according to the clinical judgment of the examining physician. Accordingly, the MAP may make use of the National Poisons Information Service (also known as National Regional Poison Centres) in the medical assessment of Gulf veterans as appropriate but has no plans to do so as a matter of routine.

The MAP was established in July 1993 to examine UK Gulf veterans who were concerned that their health had been adversely affected by service in the Gulf conflict. It is open to all Service personnel and MOD civilians who served in the Gulf region at any time between August 1990 and July 1991. Individuals who worked for contractors providing direct support to UK operations during the Gulf conflict may also attend the MAP. The vast majority of those who have attended the MAP are Gulf veterans themselves. However, where medically appropriate, veterans' partners are also welcome to attend and a small number have done so.

Applications (Armed Services)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what recent discussions he has had with *(a)* ministerial colleagues and *(b)* others on reforming the entry requirements for the armed services. [63160]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Eligibility criteria for entry into the Armed Forces are kept under constant review. A review of all nationality eligibility rules was carried out at the beginning of this year, during which officials in my Department consulted with their counterparts in the Cabinet Office, Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Home Office. The results of the review were conveyed to the House on 18 February 1998, *Official Report*, columns *665–66*.

A review of all other basic eligibility criteria is nearing completion. The aim of this review has been to determine whether any eligibility criteria are unnecessarily restrictive, and could therefore be relaxed.

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many applications to join the armed services have been refused in each of the last five years. [63161]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Details of the number of applicants who were refused entry into the Armed Forces are not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

However, the numbers of applicants and enlistments for each Service in the last five financial years were as follows:

	1993–94	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Naval Service					
Applications	[1]—	[1]—	9,696	12,879	14,252
Enlistments	1,535	1,301	2,337	3,959	4,600
Army					
Applications	36,388	53,333	43,491	40,491	42,247
Enlistments	9,576	10,684	12,911	15,522	15,379
RAF					
Applications	13,304	15,398	17,213	15,510	12,767
Enlistments	841	1,022	2,424	2,684	3,526

Note:
[1] Details of number of Naval Service applicants not available

Applicants may not subsequently be enlisted for a variety of reasons. For example, they may be ineligible under one or more of the basic eligibility criteria, have criminal convictions that are not acceptable, may fail the recruiting test, prove unsuitable at interview, or perhaps fail their medical. Additionally, a number of applicants for each Service voluntarily withdraw their applications before they are enlisted.

Defence Export Services Organisation

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will state the salary, pension entitlement and present compensation rights for early termination of contract of the new head of the Defence Export Services Organisation from the Government, what top-ups to those provisions have been made by external sources; and which external sources are providing the top-ups. [62922]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* Mr. Tony Edwards, the new Head of Defence Export Services, will receive a salary from the Ministry of Defence of £165,000 a year, plus an annual performance related bonus of up to £15,000. In addition, the Department will contribute towards his superannuation up to a maximum of 28 per cent. of the Ministry of Defence salary element.

The Defence Industries Council, acting on behalf of the defence industry as a whole, are providing a top-up element so that his basic remuneration package will remain on a par with what he was receiving from TI Group plc.

Mr. Edwards is on loan to the Department from TI Group plc. for the duration his appointment as Head of Defence Export Services; under the terms of the secondment agreement, compensation rights for early termination of the agreement do not apply.

REME (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence on what day and by whom the decision was taken to move 101 Battalion REME from Chorley Barracks to Queensferry. [63650]

Mr. Doug Henderson: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Defence announced his decision on the future structure of the Territorial Army to the House on 17 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns 749–52.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what alternative attachments he proposes for 101 REME army cadets, Chorley, following the transfer of 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry. [63616]

Mr. Doug Henderson: New sponsorship and affiliation arrangements for the Chorley Cadets will be arranged with Territorial and Regular Army units in the area.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what evidence he has received from Land Command that the decision to move 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry will bring value for money. [63651]

Mr. Doug Henderson: As my hon. Friend will be aware from our previous correspondence concerning Territorial Army restructuring, the decision to move 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry was not financially motivated. An assessment has nevertheless been made that the move should provide value for money.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) if the REME cadets based at the Devonshire Road Barracks, Chorley, will continue to operate from that barracks; [63625]

(2) what are his plans for the future army cadet presence at the Devonshire Road Barracks in Chorley. [63626]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Plans for the future of the cadets currently housed at the Devonshire Road Barracks in Chorley are being developed at present. I will write to my hon. Friend when the plans are complete, and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Defence Medical Services

Mr. Rapson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the Defence Medical Services. [63988]

Mr. George Robertson: The Strategic Defence Review, SDR, acknowledged the importance of medical support for defence, and identified a number of shortfalls, both in peacetime care and in operational medical support.

As a result of the SDR, I announced plans for significant investment in additional medical personnel and equipment of about £140 million over the next four years.

Although the SDR provided funding for substantial improvements to our medical capabilities, this did not by itself solve all the immediate problems. The Defence Medical Services, DMS, organisation continues to suffer from a number of interrelated difficulties which are hindering it in fulfilling its objectives and which are also affecting morale. In particular, serious staffing shortages combined with a high level of operational deployment have led to increased turbulence for DMS staff and their families. There is also serious concern about the continued viability of the Royal Hospital, Haslar.

I therefore set work in hand in July with the aim of producing a strategy for the resolution of these problems and to give DMS personnel a clear and positive vision of the future. I will today be publishing a summary of our findings in a booklet "The Defence Medical Services—A Strategy for the Future", copies of which will be placed in the Library of the House.

The key proposals include:

A major recruiting campaign, properly co-ordinated and targeted, aimed at both new entry Regulars and Reserves, and at a small number of direct entry ready-trained personnel to fill the most pressing shortfalls.

Tackling a range of key personnel issues to address the main problems felt by people in the DMS, including identifying the causes of overstretch and more effective ways of reducing it, harmonising different conditions of service within the DMS and addressing concerns about the need to maintain military standards and ethos while working in NHS hospitals.

Restructured Secondary Care arrangements including: a new Centre for Defence Medicine to act as a focal point for the DMS and a centre of excellence for training and research; a new Ministry of Defence Hospital Unit in Portsmouth; the eventual closure of the Royal Hospital Haslar once these new arrangements are in place; and a clearer responsibility for the Defence Secondary Care Agency to co-ordinate treatment for Service personnel.

A reorganisation of the DMS to improve management and financial co-ordination, including the creation of a new Chief of Staff post on the Surgeon General's staff to co-ordinate planning, personnel management, training, finance and the implementation of change.

Developing closer relations with the NHS, including NHS representation on the two key DMS management boards, and improved arrangements at local level.

These proposals will have a significant impact both within the DMS and outside Defence, particularly in the Portsmouth area. We will immediately begin a period of consultation on our proposals and will listen closely to the views of others, including the local community around Gosport, and the Trade Unions that represent our civilian staff. We will be working closely with the National Health Service in taking our proposals forward.

Together the proposals represent a new strategy for the DMS which addresses the very difficult problems being experienced at the moment and looks ahead to the future. We value the DMS, and we plan to rebuild it to meet the needs of our Armed Forces both on operations and in peacetime. It will provide a more attractive and rewarding career not only for those already serving but also for those thinking of joining. Above all, it will be a service in which all concerned can have confidence for the future.

Research Fellowship Scheme

Ms Christine Russell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on his Department's new post-doctoral research fellowship scheme. [63989]

Mr. George Robertson: I am pleased to announce the launch of the MOD's new Post-Doctoral Research Fellowships. The aims of this scheme are to encourage new talent in the defence field; maintain interest in defence studies in the academic community; and encourage informed debate on defence issues. Each fellowship is awarded for a three-year period and funded jointly by the MOD and the academic institution at which the fellow is based. The cost to the MOD is £15,000 per annum for each fellow.

From a strong field, we have been able to select three outstanding fellows. A dedicated Defence Diplomacy Fellowship has been awarded to Dr. Irene Isakova, a Russian national. Dr. Isakova will undertake her research with the Centre for Defence Studies at King's College London, where she will focus on the impact and effectiveness of our Defence Diplomacy initiative in and with Russia. A further two fellowships have been awarded to Dr. Asifa Hussain from the Scottish Centre for War Studies at Glasgow University, and Dr. Tanya Ogilvie-White from the Mountbatten Centre at Southampton University. Dr. Hussain's research will focus on the recruitment of ethnic minorities, race relations and equal opportunities in the Armed Forces, and Dr. Ogilvie-White will undertake research into nuclear proliferation issues. Each of these candidates is ideally placed to provide the MOD with a broader, alternative perspective on these key issues.

It is our intention that additional fellowships will now be awarded on an annual basis.

Phoenix Programme

Mr. Paul Clark: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the current status of the PHOENIX programme. [64001]

Mr. Spellar: I am pleased to announce that the PHOENIX Unmanned Aerial Vehicle system has now entered service with the Army, following successful conversion training by both 32 and 39 Regiments Royal Artillery and use of the system in exercises, where it performed well. PHOENIX will provide an important new surveillance and target acquisition system for the British Army.

Defence Bills Agency

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the outcome of the periodic review of the Defence Bills Agency. [64087]

Mr. Spellar: The Periodic Review showed that the Defence Bills Agency, DBA, had performed well against the targets set in the initial Service Level Agreement between the Agency and its MOD customers. The Agency has contained its operating costs with an increased volume of business, achieved higher standards of quality and responded to considerable challenges in the development of Resource Accounting and Budgeting. Following initial operating cost savings of 25 per cent. in the first year, the

Agency has realised further efficiencies and is now focusing on transaction costs as the key benchmark for future operations. A summary of this report is being placed in the Library of the House.

The Review was carried out in accordance with the Government's policy of securing best value for money in the provision of Services. We have concluded that this aim can best be achieved by extending Agency status for DBA for a further five years from 1 April 1999. The Agency will be given new and more challenging targets to make progressive reductions in transaction costs, while maintaining and further improving the quality of service, and meeting the Government's commitment to the prompt payment of bills. These targets will be included in a revised Framework Document which will be published in due course.

Chile

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the names of each Royal Navy vessel which has visited Chile in the last five years and the dates and duration of the visits; and what future visits to Chile by Royal Navy vessels are planned. [63409]

Mr. George Robertson: The following visits have been made to Chile by Royal Navy vessels in the last five years:

Royal Navy Vessels	*Dates*
1998	
HMS Sutherland	21–24 November 1998
HMS Edinburgh	11–13 October 1998
HMS Dumbarton Castle	17–21 September 1998
HMS Montrose	19–20 June 1998
HMS Montrose	9–13 June 1998
HMS Dumbarton Castle	23–27 April 1998
HMS Montrose	1–4 April 1998
RFA Grey Rover	11–16 March 1998
HMS Brave	23–27 January 1998
HMS Endurance	2–7 January 1998
1997	
HMS Somerset	7–10 October 1997
HMS Endurance	27 March-1 April 1997
HMS Lancaster	10–14 February 1997
1996	
HMS Leeds Castle	20–26 October 1996
HMS Montrose	11–14 June 1996
HMS Leeds Castle	20–24 April 1996
RFA Gold Rover	13–19 February 1996
HMS Endurance	4–7 January 1996
1995	
HMS Westminster	21–27 November 1995
HMS Leeds Castle	1–6 June 1995
RFA Diligence	24–29 March 1995
HMS Endurance	3–6 February 1995
1994	
HMS Dumbarton Castle	2–6 December 1994
HMS Iron Duke	15–19 September 1994
HMS Brazen	10–15 August 1994
HMS Endurance	31 March-5 April 1994
HMS Norfolk	10–14 March 1994
HMS Newcastle	23–28 February 1994
RFA Gold Rover	23–28 February 1994

Note:
HMS Endurance, the Ice Patrol Ship, is programmed to visit Chile in Spring 1999.

SCOTLAND

Driving (Tranquillisers)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what research the Government have evaluated into driving whilst prescribed *(a)* anxiolytic benzodiazepines and *(b)* the sleeping tablet Zopiclone. [62682]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have been asked to reply.

The Government have not commissioned specific research about the drugs mentioned, but a full evaluation of relevant research is being undertaken by the Medicines Control Agency.

The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is presently conducting a three-year survey, which started in October 1996, into the incidence of drugs (legal or illegal) in fatal road accident victims. A report on interim results to 7 January 1998 was published on 11 February 1998. My written answer of that date, *Official Report*, column *306*, explained that a copy was being placed in the Library.

This survey will not provide evidence of accident causation but it will help to establish the extent of drug use among road users. The interim results show that medicinal drugs were present in some 6 per cent. of road accident fatalities (drivers, passengers, pedestrians, cyclists).

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures the Government have taken to encourage GPs to issue warnings concerning the danger of driving when using *(a)* Valium, *(b)* Librium, *(c)* Ativan and *(d)* other types of tranquilliser. [62683]

Mr. Galbraith: Where there is the possibility that certain medicinal products may cause deterioration of the skills required for driving, the product information provided to doctors and pharmacists recommends that patients should be warned that they may suffer side-effects which may impair their ability to drive. Although these side-effects may wear off, the patient should ensure that they are not affected before driving.

In addition, the British National Formulary (BNF), which provides doctors, pharmacists and other health-care professionals with sound up-to-date information about the use of medicines, advises prescribers to warn patients if treatment is likely to affect their ability to drive. It also recommends that pharmacists provide cautionary and advisory labels with certain medicinal products.

The Medicines Control Agency is aware of public concern that the side-effects of some medicines may be causing road traffic accidents. In response to recent publications they are currently reviewing all available evidence to determine whether there may be a case for strengthening product information, ensuring that Patient Information Leaflets and packaging are updated if necessary.

Registers of Scotland

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the Registers of Scotland are

prohibited from providing copies of documents relating to registered interests other than those referred to in the title sheet; if he plans to reform the Land Register so that land certificates disclose information about previous proprietors and the prices paid by them; if the rights of access of members of the public and firms of private searchers to all information contained in the Land Register of Scotland, the Register of Sasines and the Register of Inhibitions and Adjudications are to be maintained; and if he will make a statement. [63117]

Mr. McLeish: Section 6(5) of the Land Register (Scotland) Act 1979 requires the Keeper to issue to any person applying, a copy, authenticated or otherwise, of any Title Sheet or part thereof or of any document referred to in a Title Sheet. There are no plans at present to reform the Land Register so that Land Certificates disclose information about previous proprietors and the prices paid by them.

The existing statutory rights of access to the Land Register, the Register of Sasines and the Register of Inhibitions and Adjudications will continue to be maintained. The ability to exercise these rights will be enhanced by remote electronic access to be provided early in 1999.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what recommendations the Scottish Law Commission has made regarding the abolition of the diligence of inhibitions on the dependence of Court actions; what was the total sum *(a)* paid by Registers of Scotland in respect of legal expenses of the petitioners and *(b)* incurred by Registers of Scotland to the Scottish Officer in relation to the action of Judicial Review raised by Millar & Bryce Ltd. and two other firms against Registers of Scotland. [63118]

Mr. McLeish: The Scottish Law Commission recently published its Report on Diligence on the Dependence and Admiralty Arrestments (Scot. Law Com. No. 164). This Report contains the Commission's recommendations for reform of the diligence of inhibition on the dependence of actions.

The total sums paid by Registers of Scotland in relation to the action of Judicial Review raised by Millar & Bryce Ltd. and 2 other firms of private searchers were as follows: *(a)* an agreed settlement of £25,000 in respect of the judicially awarded expenses of the petitioners and *(b)* £36,807.21 in respect of Registers of Scotland expenses.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many of the registration counties in Scotland for the purpose of registration of deeds are currently operational; and when the remainder are to become operational. [63119]

Mr. McLeish: There are currently 14 countries operational under the Land Register of Scotland. These are: Renfrew, Dumbarton, Lanark, Glasgow, Clackmannan, West Lothian, Stirling, Fife, Aberdeen, Kincardine, Ayr, Dumfries, Wigtown and Kirkcudbright. The programme for the completion of the extension of the Land Register programme is as follows:

1 April 1999: Perth, Angus, Kinross

1 October 1999: Berwick, East Lothian, Roxburgh, Selkirk, Peebles

1 April 2000: Argyll and Bute

1 April 2001: Midlothian

1 April 2002: Inverness and Nairn

1 April 2003: Banff, Moray, Ross and Cromarty, Caithness, Sutherland, Orkney, Zetland.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what financial return is required to be made by the executive agency Registers of Scotland in terms of percentage return on capital, taking account of the average cost of first registration under the Land Registration (Scotland) Act 1979 and the average income for registration due in respect of each transaction; if the report of the quinquennial review currently being carried out by KPMG Consultants will be made available for consultation with those interests affected by its conclusions; and if he will make a statement. [63120]

Mr. McLeish: In terms of its status as a Trading Fund under the Government Trading Funds Act 1973, the Agency is required to make a 6 per cent. return on capital employed across the range of its activities. This target will be reviewed from time to time.

The final report resulting from the Quinquennial Review of the Registers of Scotland Executive Agency will be made available to interested parties once the Secretary of State has announced the outcome of the review.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62823]

Mr. Dewar: There are currently seven people on secondment from private companies in The Scottish Office. Their names, companies and current responsibilities within government are detailed as follows:

Name	*Company*	*Current responsibilities*
Barrie Allison	Balfour and Manson Solicitors	Solicitors Office
Lorna Fleming	Balfour and Manson Solicitors	Solicitors Office
Julia Jamieson	Fife Careers Ltd.	Education Department—Skills and Life Long Learning
Valerie Mathieson	Shepherd and Wedderburn Solicitors	Solicitors Office—participating in reciprocal trainee scheme
Douglas Middleton	Bank of Scotland	Department of Health—Private Finance Unit
Martin Mustard	Project Management International PLC	Parliament Building Division
Terry Kirchin	British Petroleum PLC	Personnel Division—Devolution Planning

The Scottish Office is committed to increasing the quality and quantity of its interchange activity, in all its forms, and this year saw a good deal of activity, both at Senior Civil Servant level and below.

Insurance (Genetics)

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what measures his Department will take to encourage the insurance industry to develop alternative options for those applicants whose genetic status makes it difficult to purchase standard products. [62684]

Mr. Galbraith: The Government recently published their response to the Human Genetics Advisory Commission (HGAC) "Report on the Implications of Genetic Testing for the Insurance Industry", and are currently in discussions with the insurance industry and others on the necessary follow-up action.

It is already a requirement of the Code of Practice on Genetic Testing issued by the Association of British Insurers that insurance companies must consider whether constructive alternatives can be offered to an applicant where a genetic risk is too great to insure. It is sometimes possible for existing products to be adapted to suit individual circumstances and enable people with genetic disorders to obtain insurance. The Government believe it important that people with a family history of a genetic disorder discuss their insurance needs with insurance companies and do not assume they are uninsurable.

Secondary School Pupils

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when advanced higher qualifications will be available to secondary school pupils in Scotland. [62980]

Mrs. Liddell: The first Advanced Higher courses will run in the 2000–01 session, leading to awards in 2001.

Coalfield Regeneration

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to increase the sums available for the regeneration of former coalfields; and if he will make a statement. [62679]

Mr. Macdonald: My right hon. Friend is currently considering how best to support the regeneration of former coalfields in Scotland, including the resources to be made available for this, and will make a further announcement shortly.

Scottish Parliament

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has to recruit additional civil servants to service the demands of the Scottish Parliament. [62680]

Mr. Dewar: Action is in hand by The Scottish Office to recruit around 170 staff to service the Scottish Parliament. After devolution, staff carrying out these duties will be employees of the Scottish Parliament Corporate Body.

Acute Beds

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many acute beds were available in each health board area in Scotland in each year since 1990–91. [63131]

Mr. Galbraith: The information is set out in the table:

NHS in Scotland: average available staffed beds in acute specialties as at 31 March[2]

	1990–91	*1991–92*	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*[1]1997–98*
Argyll & Clyde	1,315	1,286	1,248	1,204	1,188	1,140	1,103	1,108
Ayrshire & Arran	1,138	1,152	1,136	1,107	1,075	971	903	900
Borders	349	354	354	348	335	336	346	335
Dumfries & Galloway	447	435	419	406	405	416	389	395
Fife	863	851	800	791	774	754	737	712
Forth Valley	625	605	600	588	592	573	556	560
Grampian	1,618	1,640	1,918	1,885	1,843	1,804	1,791	1,788
Greater Glasgow	4,615	4,194	4,036	3,899	3,651	3,581	3,518	3,446
Highland	736	740	743	729	724	796	798	804
Lanarkshire	1,691	1,665	1,632	1,592	1,550	1,526	1,496	1,462
Lothian	2,855	2,659	2,577	2,455	2,397	2,300	2,198	1,983
Orkney	62	62	62	97	91	85	89	[3]139
Shetland	53	49	46	46	46	46	50	54
Tayside	1,862	1,801	1,748	1,622	1,589	1,540	1,459	1,443
Western Isles	87	85	97	103	100	95	106	117
Scotland	18,317	17,580	17,414	16,873	16,360	15,963	15,549	15,246

[1] Provisional
[2] Includes Acute, Supra-area and Special Categories speciality groups. Excludes Obstetrics
[3] Reclassification of beds, from geriatric medicine to general practice, between 1996–97 and 1997–98

Criminal Records

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what plans he has for implementing Part V of the Police Act 1997 in Scotland providing for extended access to criminal record checks for employment vetting and other purposes. [64214]

Mr. McLeish: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary is announcing today that in order to implement Part V of the Police Act 1997 in England and Wales the Home Office will set up a Criminal Records Bureau. In Scotland the work of disclosing criminal record information will be carried out by the Scottish Criminal Record Office (SCRO), which is already well established as a central vetting authority.

The Government's main objective in introducing these arrangements is to strengthen the safeguards for the protection of children. In line with this and to ensure a smooth transition from the current arrangements for employment vetting checks, the SCRO will phase in the issue of three new types of certificates provided for under the Act. Top priority will be given to the issue of

certificates for those seeking positions that will involve regular unsupervised access to children. The scheme is to be self-financing with all applicants for certificates being charged a fee which, depending on the level of certificate sought, is currently estimated at being between £5 and £10.

We expect that it will take some two years to equip the SCRO for the new much expanded system of checks. In this time we intend to consult widely in order to ensure that the system will meet the needs of the community it serves.

Food Poisoning

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will publish a monthly breakdown of the outbreaks of food poisoning in each of the last five years. [63331]

Mr. Galbraith: Information about numbers of outbreaks is not collected centrally. The tables show the numbers of notified cases of food poisoning by four-week period.

Notifications of food poisoning [1]. Four-weekly totals, 1993–98

Week ending	*Total*
1993	
1–22 January	349
29 January-19 February	383
26 February-19 March	369
26 March-16 April	312
23 April-14 May	396
21 May-11 June	657
18 June-9 July	816
16 July-6 August	917
13 August-3 September	837
10 September-1 October	760
8–29 October	569
5–26 November	413
3–31 December	[2]379
1994	
7–28 January	361
4–25 February	377
4–25 March	386
1–22 April	385
29 April-20 May	607
27 May-17 June	888
24 June-15 July	772
22 July-12 August	1,005
19 August-9 September	935
16 September-7 October	823
14 October-4 November	685
11 November-2 December	574
9–30 December	449
1995	
6–27 January	457
3–24 February	436
3–24 March	512
31 March-21 April	418
28 April-19 May	623
26 May-16 June	854
23 June-14 July	923
21 July-11 August	1,078
18 August-8 September	1,069
15 September-6 October	905
13 October-3 November	805
10 November-1 December	634
8–29 December	529

Notifications of food poisoning [1]. Four-weekly totals, 1993–98

Week ending	*Total*
1996	
5–26 January	547
2–23 February	578
1–22 March	528
29 March-19 April	625
26 April-17 May	670
24 May-14 June	895
21 June-12 July	890
19 July-9 August	1,032
16 August-6 September	1,007
13 September-4 October	867
11 October-1 November	763
8–29 November	896
6–27 December	808
1997	
3–24 January	473
31 January-21 February	582
28 February-21 March	652
28 March-18 April	644
25 April-16 May	736
23 May-13 June	1,129
20 June-11 July	1,095
18 July-8 August	979
15 August-5 September	1,109
12 September-3 October	871
10–31 October	715
7–28 November	673
5–26 December	491
1998	
2–23 January	516
30 January-20 February	515
27 February-20 March	446
27 March-17 April	442
24 April-15 May	654
22 May-12 June	1,066
19 June-10 July	985
17 July-7 August	909
14 August-4 September	1,016
11 September-2 October	756
9–30 October	733
6–27 November	619

[1] Annual totals are revised to take account of laboratory test results confirming that illness was or was not due to food poisoning. These monthly figures have not been adjusted in that way and are therefore provisional.
[2] Comprises totals for a five-week period.

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many outbreaks of food poisoning there were in each county in each of the last five years. [63518]

Mr. Galbraith: Information about numbers of outbreaks is not collected centrally. Nor is information about numbers of cases of food poisoning collected by county. The following table shows the numbers of notified cases of food poisoning by Health Board area.

	1993	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*[1]1998*
Scotland	7,170	8,291	9,297	10,234	10,144	8,622
Argyll and Clyde	326	566	634	736	696	668
Ayrshire and Arran	411	385	446	393	431	377
Borders	175	236	238	284	358	154
Dumfries and Galloway	313	338	343	303	288	268
Fife	549	560	634	579	652	503
Forth Valley	365	491	411	529	610	548
Grampian	1,150	1,103	1,771	1,585	1,448	1,245
Greater Glasgow	732	1,174	1,293	1,367	1,493	1,491
Highland	342	329	328	364	425	334
Lanarkshire	742	862	952	1,376	1,103	960

	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	[1]1998
Lothian	1,394	1,531	1,630	1,984	1,814	1,519
Orkney	29	8	15	23	13	11
Shetland	46	45	25	57	74	39
Tayside	570	627	548	608	690	471
Western Isles	26	36	29	46	49	34

[1] Provisional notifications, subject to revision

Mixed-sex Hospital Wards

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many mental health hospitals or psychiatric units in Scotland have mixed-sex wards; and if he will list them. [63787]

Mr. Galbraith: I will write to the hon. Member and place a copy of my reply in the Library.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Arms Exports

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development when her Department was given new powers to object to proposed arms exports; what these powers entail; and if she will make a statement. [63846]

Clare Short: Licences to export arms are issued by the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (DTI). The Export Control Organisation of the DTI is the licensing authority. A number of Departments provide advice; DFID has done so since September 1997. The Department for International Development's (DFID) interest in export licence applications is primarily that the proposed export does not seriously undermine the economy of the recipient country; and also that the equipment is not used for purposes of internal repression or external aggression. We focus our efforts on examining applications to poor countries.

World Disability Report

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if her Department will provide financial assistance to the International Disability Foundation to disseminate their world disability report. [63693]

Clare Short: Yes. A grant of £15,000, the sum requested by the International Disability Foundation was approved on 3 December, the World Day of Disabled People.

Good Governance

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will set out the basic principles of good governance required by her Department of a country in which she is considering aid provision. [63790]

Clare Short: Our commitment is to reduce poverty through sustainable development. We work with governments who have a commitment to working for the elimination of poverty. This requires effective economic management, efficient government systems, the reduction of corruption, and investment in human development. We engage in dialogue with government where possible. Where we cannot work with government we will find other channels including parts of government, local government and NGOs which share our commitment.

Trade

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on promotion of United Kingdom trade in developing countries. [63849]

Clare Short: We believe that increasing trade in the poorest countries will contribute to economic growth and poverty elimination. The Department for International Development (DFID) works to improve the trading environment by encouraging open markets, good regulation, reduced corruption and strong education and health systems.

We support specific trade and investment initiatives where there is a clear development outcome. For example DFID is promoting links between UK small and medium enterprises and small businesses in South Africa.

Sustainable Development

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action she has taken to work with British business to strengthen support for investment and trade which contributes to sustainable development. [63646]

Clare Short: We have greatly strengthened the links between the department and British business since May 1997. We have established a Business Partnership Unit for this purpose and now consult with Business when preparing our strategies for working with individual countries or multilateral development agencies: we also seek to improve the operating environment for investment and trade (for example, through consultative forums on regulatory constraints); help business meet their corporate responsibility objectives (for example, through joint projects to tackle social and environmental issues and invest in the health and education of the workforce) and through partnerships which deepen the impact of business on the local economy (for example, through projects to help large business source from local suppliers). These initiatives all contribute to sustainable development and assist British businesses to invest and trade with the poorest countries.

China

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's policy on concessional financing in China. [63847]

Clare Short: The White Paper on International Development (Cm 3789), published in November of last year, announced the abolition of the Aid and Trade Provision (ATP) and set out our policy on possible assistance to the private sector in paragraph 2.35. Any potential assistance would be subject to the strategy and sectoral focus agreed for each country and the standard procedures for quality control. We also made clear that all ATP projects previously agreed and still under implementation would be completed. This policy applies in China and elsewhere.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress she has made in the promotion of human rights in China; and if she will make a statement. [63845]

Clare Short: The Government seek to support all the human rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in China and elsewhere, which means that we are concerned with economic and social rights as well as civil and political rights. We are engaged in dialogue with the Chinese authorities and have increased the frequency of formal talks. These have provided the opportunity for us to raise concerns about issues such as China's one child policy, imprisonment without trial, freedom of religion and executions.

As an additional means to addressing the economic and social rights of poor people in China, we are currently designing a range of projects (in basic health, education and water development) with a probable value of some £40 million. Meanwhile, we have approved a £670,000 project to help improve the lives of orphaned children in Shanghai through the introduction of a foster care system and are exploring the scope for further co-operation in the field of prison management reform and measures to combat corruption.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what consultations she carried out with the private sector when preparing her country strategy for China. [63544]

Clare Short: In preparing the China country strategy, my officials sought the views of companies with interests in China through the China Britain Trade Group and the British Chamber of Commerce in Beijing. Views were also sought from institutions, including the International Finance Corporation and the Commonwealth Development Corporation, which have strong private sector interests. In addition to the private sector, officials consulted civil society organisations, the academic community and a wide range of Chinese interlocutors.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the Commonwealth Development Corporation's investments in China. [63848]

Clare Short: At present the Commonwealth Development Corporation (CDC) does not have any investments in China.

Country Strategies

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what consultations she has carried out with the private sector when preparing her country strategies. [63545]

Clare Short: Consultations with the private sector and other elements of civil society have been part of the process of developing country strategies since May 1997. The channels used vary depending on country circumstances. Country strategy papers which have been finalised since the Government's White Paper on Development contain an annexe which sets out the process of consultation, including consultation that has taken place with the private sector. The papers are published and are also available in the Libraries of the House. They are also available to the public.

Commonwealth Development Corporation

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the countries in which the Commonwealth Development Corporation currently invests. [63791]

Clare Short: Commonwealth Development Corporation currently has investment in the following countries:

Anguilla
Bangladesh
Barbados
Belize
Bolivia
Botswana
British Virgin Islands
Cameroon
Cayman Islands
Costa Rica
Cote d'Ivoire
Cuba
Dominica
Dominican Republic
Ecuador
El Salvador
Fiji
Gambia
Ghana
Grenada
Guatemala
Guyana
Honduras
India
Indonesia
Jamaica
Kenya
Laos
Lesotho
Liberia
Malawi
Malaysia
Mauritius
Mozambique
Namibia
Nicaragua
Nigeria
Pakistan
Papua New Guinea
Philippines
St. Lucia
Seychelles
Sierra Leone
Solomon Islands
South Africa
Sri Lanka
Sudan
Swaziland
Tanzania
Thailand

Trinidad and Tobago
Uganda
Vanuatu
Vietnam
Zambia
Zimbabwe.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in her Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63919]

Clare Short: Since May 1997 the Department for International Development has spent:

(a) around £43,000 on public opinion research; and

(b) around £1.2 million on recruitment advertising in newspapers and journals.

(c) No expenditure on direct mail.

Multilateral Development Projects

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she has taken to ensure that multilateral development projects make full use of the skills of United Kingdom business. [63543]

Clare Short: We work with the Department of Trade and Industry's Development Business Team, which has specific responsibility to help UK business secure trade opportunities from multilateral development projects. DFID staff ensure that DTI has access to good information about the pipeline and strategies of the multilateral organisations.

British firms do well from multilateral procurement. For example, in fiscal year 1996, British firms secured contracts worth around £458 million from the World Bank, over twice the amount of the British government's annual contribution to the Bank in that year.

PRIME MINISTER

Devolution

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Prime Minister where responsibility will lie for determining what programmes and bodies will be ultra-vires for the purpose of UK-wide funding after the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [63659]

The Prime Minister: Under the terms of the Scotland Act 1998 and the Government of Wales Act 1998, Scottish Ministers and the National Assembly for Wales will assume responsibility for a range of functions which will depend, in part, on secondary legislation which has yet to be passed.

In the case of Scotland, Government Departments are reviewing their programmes in the light of the Scotland Act to determine the extent of programme expenditure which may relate to functions which will transfer to Scottish Ministers.

In the case of the National Assembly for Wales, the Transfer of Functions Order, which was published in draft form for public consultation on 12 November, will transfer certain ministerial functions to the National Assembly for Wales. Work continues on finalising the draft Order and determining the programme expenditure which relates to those functions which will transfer.

Following devolution, the question of whether or not expenditure by UK Ministers is ultra vires will rest primarily with those Ministers acting on the advice of their Accounting Officers. In the unlikely even that there is a disagreement over whether such funding is ultra vires for UK Ministers, as defined by both primary and secondary legislation, the disagreement would usually be resolved through discussion between the relevant administrations. Failing this, the final arbiter would be the courts.

Privy Council

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Prime Minister if he will review the criteria used in formulating advice on appointments to the Privy Council. [62165]

The Prime Minister: Membership of the Privy Council is normally reserved for those who are involved in affairs of State and who have a close and confidential relationship with the Crown. In practice, this means those who have obtained high office in the executive or the judicial branches of the State either in this country or in one of the countries of which The Queen is Head of State. It follows that most new Privy Councillors are serving Ministers, Judges or Commonwealth appointments. I have no plans to review the criteria.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Chile

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Attorney-General which law officers have met the Foreign Minister of Chile in the past two months; and for what purpose. [63524]

The Attorney-General: Neither.

TREASURY

Fuel Duty (Northern Ireland)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what schemes he has evaluated to assist petrol retailers in Northern Ireland to cope with differential rates of excise duty in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. [62236]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* The lead on this is being taken by HM Customs & Excise which, in conjunction with other authorities, including the Royal Ulster Constabulary, is acting to counter the threat posed to legitimate petrol retailers, the wider business community and the collection of revenue. While my right hon. Friend sees no grounds for specific assistance to Northern Ireland petrol retailers, some of the measures in the £315 million Economic Initiative he announced last May are likely to be directly beneficial to Northern Ireland petrol retailers. The measures included the extension of 100 per cent. capital

allowances on expenditure by small and medium enterprises on machinery or plant used in Northern Ireland and a substantial and extensive capital investment in Northern Ireland's road network.

Economic Cycle

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is his estimate of the length of the current economic cycle. [62439]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* The Pre-Budget Report (cm. 4076) reported that the economy is estimated to have been on trend in the first half of 1997 (paragraph A39), and is not assumed to reach an equivalent point until 2002 (paragraph A54, chart A4 refers).

Abortion

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer by what area of residence, other than health authorities, statistics are collected on abortions performed by the NHS. [63606]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Neil Gerrard, dated 14 December 1998:

As Director of the Office of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question on the areas for which abortion statistics are collected.

Under Section 2(2) of the Abortion Act 1967, registered medical practitioners must notify the Chief Medical Officer of every completed termination of pregnancy, and the ONS undertakes the statistical processing of the abortions data. Data is currently published at NHS Executive Regional Office level and health authority level.

Wages

Mr. Edwards: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what were in April the number and proportion of *(a)* male, *(b)* female and *(c)* all (i) full-time manual, (ii) full-time non-manual and (iii) full-time employees on adult rates earning less than (1) £181.40, (2) £241.86 and (3) £261.46 per week excluding overtime in (A) each county and unitary authority in England, (B) each unitary authority in Wales, (C) each London borough, (D) each unitary authority in Scotland, (E) Great Britain as a whole, (F) England as a whole and (G) each Government office region. [63496]

Ms Hewitt: The information requested falls within the responsibility of the Director of the Office for National Statistics. I have asked him to reply. A copy of the tables referred to will be placed in the Library.

Letter from Tim Holt to Mr. Huw Edwards, dated 14 December 1998:

As the Director of the Office for National Statistics (ONS), I have been asked to reply to your recent question requesting earnings information for a range of geographical areas.

The latest available information, from New Earnings Survey (NES) April 1998, is contained in the attached tables.

I will arrange for a copy of this letter to be placed in the Library.

Paymaster General

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list the areas of tax policy in which the Paymaster General has been involved since 2 May 1997; and if he will make a statement; [63498]

(2) which Minister is responsible for the review of corporate taxation; and if he will make a statement; [63499]

(3) what are the reasons for changes in the policy responsibilities of the Paymaster General in relation to tax matters in the last eight months; and if he will make a statement. [63497]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I am responsible for all decisions on matters of tax policy.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what changes he plans in the responsibilities of the Paymaster General. [63511]

Mr. Gordon Brown: None.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Modernisation of the House

39. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the President of the Council what progress she has made in modernising the procedures of the House. [62170]

Mrs. Beckett: The House recently approved the Modernisation Committee's proposals on the scrutiny of European documents and will consider its report on the parliamentary calendar this Wednesday.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Millennium Compliance

37. **Mr. Chope:** To ask the President of the Council when she intends to publish the next quarterly return on the progress of Government Departments towards millennium compliance. [62167]

Mrs. Beckett: I announced the results of the latest quarterly review in a statement to the House on 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 902–05. Copies of the individual return from Departments and agencies have been placed in the Libraries of the House and published on the internet.

38. **Helen Jones:** To ask the President of the Council if she will make a statement on the progress being made in terms of the preparedness of the national infrastructure to cope with the millennium date change. [62169]

Mrs. Beckett: Responsible departments and regulators are working with the major infrastructure providers to ensure that they are taking proper steps to tackle the Millennium bug.

We have also set up through Action 2000 a National Infrastructure Forum. The Forum brings together the main providers and users of infrastructure services to share best practice and information about their state of preparedness.

A key part of the Forum's work is an Independent Assessment Project to assess the state of preparedness of key infrastructure services, including the electricity, water, fuels, telecommunications and financial sectors. The results of the first assessment of the water industry were announced by OFWAT on 22 October. The first results for the other key sectors should be available early in the New Year.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Digital Television

15. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plan he has to ensure that digital television will be available to the most remote communities in Britain. [62142]

Janet Anderson: Digital terrestrial television services began on 15 November and will reach 90 per cent. of the UK population by the end of next year. Digital satellite services currently reach much of the UK and digital cable services are likely to begin next year. Extending digital services beyond the terrestrial launch phase to other parts of the UK, including remote communities, was one of the issues raised in our consultation paper "Television: the Digital Future". The responses to that paper are currently being evaluated. Once that process is complete the Government will be in a position to consider with the broadcasters the next steps towards extending digital services across the UK.

Millennium Fund

16. **Mrs. Heal:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what contribution the millennium fund will make to tackling social exclusion. [62143]

26. **Ms Ward:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what contribution the millennium fund plans to make to projects to tackle social exclusion. [62154]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Government have sought to ensure that the Millennium celebrations will be inclusive, involving people from all religious and cultural backgrounds, all social groups and all areas of the United Kingdom. We also want to see a lasting legacy from the celebrations. Many of the projects funded by the Millennium Commission—particularly through their Awards scheme—will strengthen local community infrastructure and encourage active citizenship in both urban and rural areas.

Strategic Authority for Tourism

17. **Mr. Gray:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the role of a strategic authority for tourism in England. [62144]

Janet Anderson: My Department launched a consultation exercise on 24 July which sought views on a variety of issues, including a strategic authority for English tourism. (The main conclusions of the consultation were made public this morning). A majority of the responses we received confirmed my view that there is a need for a national body of this type to support the new tourism strategy.

Broadcasting Standards

18. **Mr. Swayne:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures he is taking to reduce the number of profane and iewd broadcasts on television. [62146]

Janet Anderson: Broadcasters are subject to the general law and are required to comply with the regulators' guidelines on programme content. It is a long-standing and, I believe, a fundamental principle that Government do not intervene directly in issues of broadcasting content. Responsibility for enforcing the rules lies with the regulators, who are charged with safeguarding the public interest.

New Opportunities Fund

19. **Mr. Brady:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the funding of the new opportunities fund between 1997 and 2005. [62147]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have announced New Opportunities Fund programmes of £1.4 billion to date. I have made no estimate of the Fund's income beyond the life of the current licence, which expires in September 2001.

Culture (Devolved Responsibility)

20. **Mrs. Butler:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what proposals he has to devolve responsibility for culture to the regions. [62148]

Mr. Alan Howarth: A new body will be established in each region to provide a strong, strategic voice for all cultural interests. A number of the public bodies sponsored by my Department are also delegating more responsibility to the regions. Further details are contained in the announcement which my right hon. Friend made earlier today on the results of the Department's Comprehensive Spending Review.

National Lottery

21. **Mr. Fraser:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has for the selection procedures for an operator for the national lottery when Camelot's licence expires. [62149]

Mr. Chris Smith: The selection procedures for the next Lottery operator will be determined by the National Lottery Commission, which will take over the functions of the Director General of the National Lottery next year. The Commission will make its decision in line with its statutory responsibilities and my directions.

Lottery Awards (Distribution)

22. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received about the equality of distribution of lottery awards. [62150]

Mr. Chris Smith: I frequently receive representations about different aspects of the National Lottery, including the equality of the distribution of awards.

We are determined to ensure that Lottery money is allocated more fairly and equitably in the light of need across the whole of the United Kingdom and between different groups in society. The National Lottery Act 1998 requires distributors to show how they will achieve this in their strategic plans.

Performing Arts (Social Exclusion)

23. **Miss Begg:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on the contribution the performing arts can make to reducing social exclusion. [62151]

28. **Ms Buck:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what assessment he has made of the contribution of the performing arts to measures to reduce social exclusion. [62156]

Mr. Alan Howarth: One of my Department's principal objectives is to promote the role of the Department's sectors, including the performing arts, in combating social exclusion. The New Audiences Fund will continue to support projects which broaden access for young people and others who would not normally have an opportunity to experience the arts. Furthermore, as part of our contribution to the Government's forthcoming strategy for neighbourhood renewal, my Department is chairing an action team which will report on best practice in using the arts and sport to combat social exclusion.

Good Causes (Distribution of Funds)

24. **Mr. Fabricant:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the amount of money available to be distributed for each of the good causes for *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000 and *(c)* 2000–2001 and the percentages these represent of total funds available for distribution by the good causes. [62152]

Mr. Chris Smith: The Lottery is now set to raise £10.6 billion for good causes over the licence period, £600 million above previous forecasts.

As I have explained to the hon. Member previously, we are currently discussing with the distributing bodies how best to adjust their percentage shares in order to achieve the intended allocation of the extra £600 million. Until these discussions are complete, the annual income assumptions for the good causes cannot be finalised. We plan to lay an Order as soon as possible giving effect to these adjustments.

Arts (Public Funding)

25. **Helen Jackson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he will take steps to ensure the more equitable geographical distribution of public funding for arts. [62153]

Mr. Alan Howarth: My right hon. Friend announced this morning an extra £123 million for the Arts Council of England over the next three years. The Arts Council will be announcing later this week how they propose to allocate these extra funds among the Regional Arts Board.

International Sports

27. **Mr. Caplin:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his policy for promoting success for Britain in international sports competitions. [62155]

Mr. Banks: The package of reforms we announced in July to establish the Sports Cabinet and strengthen the United Kingdom Sports Council will ensure our top sportsmen and women receive the very best support which will enable them to continue competing successfully on the international stage.

Writers (Financial Assistance)

29. **Mr. McWalter:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to provide financial assistance to writers of works of non-fiction. [62158]

Mr. Alan Howarth: The Arts Council of England, which my Department funds, supports writers of literature including writers of biography and autobiography.

Television Coverage (Sports)

30. **Dr. Cable:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to ensure that a higher proportion of major sporting events, with particular reference to rugby union, is accessible to all television licence payers. [62159]

Janet Anderson: Following my Department's review of listed events earlier this year, we revised the list to allow the ITC to protect free-to-air coverage of more events than ever before. The list now includes international rugby union for the first time. Matches involving the home countries in the Five Nations tournament and the whole of the Rugby Union World Cup finals tournament were included in the new list which my right hon. Friend announced on 25 June 1998, *Official Report*, columns *600–01*.

Football Regulator

31. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will appoint a football regulator. [62160]

Mr. Banks: The management and development of individual sports is the responsibility of the appropriate governing bodies. We have recognised the special role football plays in this country by establishing the Football Task Force to investigate issues of concern to all those involved with the game. The Task Force is currently considering the complex issues associated with the commercial aspects of the game, which may include whether some kind of football regulator is required. I look forward to receiving the Task Force's commercial report.

Sponsorship (Sports)

Mr. Hawkins: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent discussions he has had with sporting governing bodies about sponsorship. [62127]

Mr. Banks: My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I held meetings last year with sports likely to be affected by the ban on tobacco sponsorship. Since then

my officials have been in regular contact with them. We have been seeking detailed background information on the sports and current contracts with the tobacco companies, so the expert group I have set up can judge how best to help the sports attract alternative sponsors.

Industrial Heritage

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what recent steps he has taken to support Britain's industrial heritage. [62139]

Mr. Alan Howarth: I was very pleased to be able to announce to the House on 9 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *59*, that my Department will pay an annual revenue subsidy grant to the National Coal Mining Museum for England from next year. The Museum, based at the former Caphouse Colliery near Wakefield, has a fascinating story to tell about an industry which, both economically and socially, has been of enormous importance to this country.

Hinduja

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what grant applications his Department has received from the Hinduja group of companies since 1 May 1997; and what grants have been paid. [62240]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* I am not aware that any grant applications to my Department have been submitted by the Hinduja group of companies. However, to confirm that there have been no such applications would entail disproportionate cost to the Department, given the number of Grant Schemes administered by the Department and the fact that the Hinduja Group consists of a large number of companies with different names.

Television Licences

Dr. Iddon: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimate he has made of the number of units of accommodation for which there should be a television licence; how many licences were issued for *(a)* monochrome and *(b)* colour receivers; and how many people were reported for failing to possess a television licence in the last year for which figures are available. [63314]

Janet Anderson: The estimated number of premises requiring a television licence as at 31 March 1998 was 23.6 million. At that date, there were 21.3 million colour television licences and 379,000 black and white television licences in force. During the year to 31 March 1998, 364,000 prosecution statements were taken in respect of television licence fee evasion and there were 112,000 prosecutions.

Scottish Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if he will list *(a)* by programme over £50,000 and *(b)* the total of spending by his Department in Scotland on the identifiable spending areas detailed in Table 7.6A of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 1997–98 (Cmnd 3601); which of these programmes will fall solely or jointly under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament; and what arrangements are in place to transfer control of funds for these projects to the Scottish Executive or Parliament; [63288]

(2) what assessment he has made of the programmes which it will be ultra vires for this Department to fund or have sole responsibility for after devolution; if he will list these programmes; and if he will make a statement. [63289]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* Under the terms of the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish Ministers will assume responsibility for a range of devolved functions which will in part depend on secondary legislation which has yet to be passed. My Department is reviewing its programmes in the light of the Scotland Act. It is too early to say to what extent programme expenditure which is currently administered by the Department may relate to functions which will transfer to Scottish Ministers. Work is taking place to establish the extent of any such expenditure and to assess the need for any consequential transfer of funds to the Scottish Ministers. For the total spending by the Department in Scotland I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *615*.

"A New Approach to Investment in Culture"

Mr. Miller: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects to publish his conclusions on the matters raised in his consultation paper, "A New Approach to Investment in Culture", of 24 July 1998. [63668]

Mr. Chris Smith: The consultation paper which I issued in July contained a number of proposals for change in sectors for which my Department is responsible. At the same time I was able to announce an extra £290 million for those sectors over the next three years. Today I am publishing the conclusions I have reached in the light of the consultation, together with the detailed allocation of funding to sponsored bodies.

Some of the main conclusions from the document are:

a new watchdog to monitor and improve standards of efficiency and financial management and promote quality across all our sectors;

streamlining of national bodies in the arts and crafts, the built heritage, film and museums and libraries to improve the delivery of services across these sectors

a more effective, slimmer national strategic body for tourism in England

a new national body to champion architecture

a stronger voice for culture in the English regions, and a DCMS presence in all Government Offices

new three year funding agreements with DCMS's sponsored bodies, placing clear responsibilities on those bodies to deliver our objectives against demanding targets.

Copies of the document—"A New Cultural Framework"—have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Coalfield Communities

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what action he has taken to increase access to Lottery funds for former coalfield communities in the East Midlands. [62157]

Mr. Banks: I recognise that certain areas, including coalfields communities, have done less well than others from Lottery funding. My Department hosted a conference in Barnsley on 10 November to discuss how the Lottery can assist in the regeneration of the coalfields. In addition, we are working with the distributors to investigate the reasons for the low take-up of funds in many coalfield areas.

The National Lottery Act 1998 contains a number of measures designed to bring about a fairer and more equitable distribution of funds across all regions and parts of the UK. It requires distributors to examine the needs of their sectors systematically and to draw up strategic plans which reflect those needs and their proposals for addressing them; it gives distributors new powers to encourage specific applications which do not come forward spontaneously; and it enables them to delegate decision-making closer to the grass roots and to enter into joint schemes.

All of these measures will help to deliver more Lottery money to coalfield areas.

Rugby League

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has for establishing a centre of excellence for Rugby League. [62137]

Mr. Banks: It is the responsibility of the Rugby Football League to consider whether they wish to establish a centre of excellence and, if so, to come forward with proposals on how they might link this into the facilities and services of the UK Sports Institute.

Sporting Events

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will make a statement on his efforts to bring top-class sporting events to the UK. [62145]

Mr. Banks: This Government are committed to providing the strongest possible promotional and diplomatic support for the bidding and staging of major sporting events in the UK. We are already providing strong support for the bids for the 2003 World Athletics Championships and the 2006 World Cup. In addition, I am working closely with the British Olympic Association to ensure that all the ingredients are in place to mount a winnable bid for the Olympic Games at the earliest possible date.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Medway Secure Training Centre

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will place in the Library a copy of the procedure on public interest disclosure operated by Rebound for staff at the Medway Secure Training Centre. [63173]

Mr. Boateng: I am not aware of any such document. Clause 68 of the contract with Rebound for the provision of the Medway Secure Training centre deals with confidential information and use of documents. A copy of the contract was placed in the Library on 11 March 1997.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62827]

Mr. Straw: At present, two people in the Home Office are recorded centrally as being on secondment from private companies. One is from Barclays Bank plc and is working in the Home Office Strategy Unit as part of a Home Office team advising on internal management issues, such as finance, Information Technology, and business change. The other is from the Refugee Council and is working in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate, assisting on reviewing the level of asylum seeker support arrangements.

Shapurji Saklatvala

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 3 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *251–52*, on Shapurji Saklatvala, when the security service expects to begin its review of its inter-war records in preparation for further releases. [63236]

Mr. Straw: The Security Service plans to begin releasing material from World War Two in January 1999. The process of reviewing for release its quite extensive stock of records for that period will take some time to complete. Under current plans, I do not expect the Service to begin reviewing its inter-war records before the year 2000.

Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme

Mr. Dismore: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what plans he has to uprate the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme tariff for inflation; and if he will make a statement; [63389]

(2) what representations he has received about changes to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme; and if he will make a statement. [63390]

Mr. Boateng: We have received representations and inquiries about changes to the Criminal Injuries Compensation Scheme from a number of bodies, including the Association of Personal Injury Lawyers, the Law Society, the Victim Support National Office and local victim support schemes, and the Trades Union Congress. Individual members of the public have also put their views to us. We have been considering these, along with the findings which emerged from the Comprehensive Spending Review. We hope to be able to announce fairly early in the New Year how we intend to take matters forward.

Public Service Vehicles Regulations

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions there have been in

each of the last five years for contravention of paragraph 4 of the Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) Regulations 1990. [63679]

Mr. Boateng: Unfortunately, information collected centrally on the Home Office Court Proceedings Database does not distinguish offences committed under paragraph 4 of the Public Service Vehicles (Conduct of Drivers, Inspectors, Conductors and Passengers) Regulations 1990 from other summary offences.

However, I understand that since February 1996, when computerised records began, the Vehicle Inspectorate has recorded no prosecutions in England and Wales under the provisions of paragraph 4.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he was notified by the Department for Education and Employment of cases in which convicted sex offenders have been offered placements working with children under the new deal programme. [63889]

Mr. Boateng: These allegations were brought to my Department's attention by officials in the Department for Education and Employment on 8 December.

Neighbourhood Watch

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of neighbourhood watch schemes. [63420]

Mr. Boateng: The most recent research was a survey of 120 neighbourhood watch co-ordinators from a representative range of police force areas in England and Wales carried out in 1997. This concluded that neighbourhood watches could be a useful aid to the police but also identified areas of potential improvement, for example, the need to involve young people more in neighbourhood watch work. The Home Office and the National Neighbourhood Watch Association are working jointly to achieve these improvements.

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of neighbourhood watch schemes, with particular reference to security for the elderly. [63421]

Mr. Boateng: A survey of 120 neighbourhood watch scheme co-ordinators from a representative range of police force areas in England and Wales was carried out in 1997. Guidance subsequently issued to neighbourhood watch co-ordinators emphasises the need to address personal safety issues, including those of the elderly.

I recently attended the National Neighbourhood Watch and was pleased to see that the National award was won by Wrexham Neighbourhood Watch Action and Advice Unit. As one of its diverse activities, it gives special help to the elderly and its example will be used to promote good practice within the neighbourhood watch movement.

Senator Pinochet

Mr. Paterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what the cost to date to public funds is for the extradition proceedings against Senator Pinochet; and if he will make a statement. [63833]

Mr. Straw: Figures are not yet available. Costs in extradition proceedings are generally treated on a reciprocal basis. In this case, the United Kingdom is responsible for the costs of processing extradition requests made from Spain. In return, Spain is responsible for the costs of processing extradition requests made from the United Kingdom.

The House of Lords awarded costs against Senator Pinochet for proceedings before the House of Lords and the Divisional Court. I was awarded costs against Senator Pinochet in the Divisional Court.

Criminal Records Bureau

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to provide for criminal record checks by implementing Part V of the Police Act 1997. [64102]

Mr. Straw: In order to implement Part V of the Police Act 1997, we will set up the Criminal Records Bureau. The Bureau will be established in Merseyside under the management of the United Kingdom Passport Agency, which has a proven track record of discreet delivery of a large application driven service. Appropriate use will be made of public private partnerships to contain set up and running costs, but the core work of examining records and issuing certificates will be handled by civil servants within the Bureau. Once established, it will be self financing through charging for each certificate to be issued as provided for under the 1997 Act. All applicants for certificates will be required to pay a fee which, depending on the level of certificate sought, we estimate will cost between five and ten pounds.

The Government's main objective in introducing these arrangements is to strengthen the safeguards for the protection of children. In line with this, and to ensure a smooth transition from the current arrangements for employment vetting checks of police records, the Bureau will phase in the issue of the three types of certificate provided for under the Act. Top priority will be given to the issue of certificates for those seeking positions which involve regularly caring for, training, supervising or being in sole charge of persons aged under 18. The Government are no less concerned about the need for similar safeguards to protect vulnerable adults; extending these arrangements to this area will require careful consideration and consultation.

We estimate that it will take some two years to establish the Bureau. In this time, we intend to consult widely on all aspects of the Bureau's operation to ensure that it meets the needs of the community.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

Solicitors (Convictions)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will introduce legislation to ensure that solicitors convicted of a crime are struck off. [62850]

Mr. Hoon: Section 47 of the Solicitors Act 1974 gives the Solicitors Disciplinary Tribunal the power to strike a solicitor off the roll if it thinks fit. The Government have no plans to amend this provision.

Legal Aid (Reform)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if additional resources will accompany reform of the legal aid system to assist those who cannot afford basic legal services. [62910]

Mr. Hoon: We will be spending £248 million more on legal aid over the next three years than the previous Government intended. In addition, we will refocus those resources on areas of greatest need, such as social welfare and public interest work, and will achieve the maximum value for the resources available. Removing legal aid where a suitable alternative exists, and the greater control of cost that the reforms will bring, will enable us to devote more funds to these areas. As a first step, the Lord Chancellor recently announced the allocation of a minimum of £20m for the expansion of advice and assistance services provided by the not-for-profit sector. In addition, more people in future will be able to get advice and assistance, by allowing in people who can afford to pay a contribution but who are entirely excluded now on financial grounds. The extension in July of conditional fee agreements to all civil cases will also greatly improve access to justice for people who cannot themselves afford legal help and do not qualify for legal aid.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62835]

Mr. Hoon: Garry Hart is the only special adviser in this Department. He advises on the full range of issues for which the Lord Chancellor is responsible, with the explicit exception of the following areas:

the appointment, deployment and terms and conditions of individual judges (and papers relating to these matters); and

Departmental staff matters.

Garry Hart's appointment is subject to the usual security clearance arrangements.

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62802]

Mr. Hoon: A list has been placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62828]

Mr. Hoon: No one within the Lord Chancellor's Department Headquarters is currently on secondment from a private company.

Legal Education and Conduct

Jacqui Smith: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department when the Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Legal Education and Conduct intends to publish its Seventh Annual report. [64007]

Mr. Hoon: The Lord Chancellor's Advisory Committee on Legal Education and Conduct has today published its seventh annual report, and copies have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

HEALTH

ENT Clinics

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average waiting time is for routine appointments at ENT clinics in *(a)* England and Wales and *(b)* Portsmouth. [62489]

Mr. Milburn: Information on average waiting times for an outpatient appointment are not collected centrally. However, in England during the second quarter of 1998–99, 72 per cent. of patients were seen within 13 weeks of a general practitioner written referral for a first outpatient appointment at an ear nose and throat clinic, with 95 per cent. of patients seen within 26 weeks.

During the same period, in Portsmouth and South East Hampshire Health Authority 93 per cent. of patients were seen within 13 weeks of a GP written referral for a first outpatient appointment at an ENT clinic, with 97 per cent. seen within 26 weeks.

Waiting times at ENT clinics in Wales are a matter for my right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State for Wales.

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his e-mail address. [62555]

Ms Jowell: The Secretary of State for Health does not currently have an e-mail address.

Aromatherapy

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to regulate the practice of aromatherapy. [63043]

Ms Jowell: The Department does not directly regulate any professional practice. Our policy is to encourage responsible, accountable self-regulation. Our main concern is to help health care professions who have statutory basis for their self-regulation to modernise and strengthen it. Other professions may want to put their self-regulation onto a statutory basis. This is a laudable ambition, but there is much to be done and we must give priority to the professions which provide the majority of services to National Health Service patients.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the number of aromatherapists who are currently practising in the UK. [63086]

Ms Jowell: The Department does not routinely collect statistics on the number of complementary therapy practitioners in the United Kingdom. A survey

carried out for the Department by the University of Exeter in 1997 estimated that there were approximately 5,900 aromatherapists practising in the UK at that time.

Herbal Remedies

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans the Medical Control Agency has to review the status of soft licence herbal remedies. [63085]

Ms Jowell: There is no category of soft licensed herbal remedies in the United Kingdom. Herbal remedies require marketing authorisation, unless exempted from the requirement for a product licence under the terms of Section 12 of the Medicines Act 1968.

Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress he has made with the independent and fundamental review of the current operations of the five statutory bodies created by the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979. [62689]

Mr. Milburn: We are considering the report of the review. An announcement will be made as soon as possible.

Funeral Costs

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what research has been undertaken by his Department on the effects of recent changes to Social Security Fund payments on the numbers of section 46 funerals. [62790]

Ms Jowell: None. Payments have been made from the Social Fund for some years for a funeral service and burial or cremation. Certain additional expenses have been met since 1997, but these are unlikely to affect the number of funerals paid for by local authorities.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what guidance has been issued to local authorities regarding the manner in which section 46 funerals should be conducted. [62791]

Ms Jowell: Guidance on the detailed interpretation of the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984, including guidance on section 46, was issued by the Public Health Legal Information Unit in 1994.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what the average cost is of a section 46 funeral; and what is the average level of payment made by the Social Fund. [62789]

Ms Jowell: The Department does not record local authority payments for funerals carried out under section 46 of the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984. Questions on payments from the Social Fund are a matter for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security.

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many funerals were provided by local authorities in England and Wales under section 46 of the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act 1984 in each year since 1990. [62792]

Ms Jowell: The information requested is not available centrally.

Emergency Treatment Fees (Road Accidents)

Mr. Cann: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on his policy on emergency treatment fees in the NHS for road accidents. [63163]

Mr. Hutton: We intend to end collection of the Emergency Treatment Fee by National Health Service trusts. An amendment to section 158 of the Road Traffic Act 1988, removing the right of NHS trusts to the Fee, is contained in the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill which was introduced in the House on 27 November 1998.

Clinical Waste Disposal

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the cost to the NHS of making rigid containers for clinical waste mandatory. [63162]

Mr. Milburn: It is not possible to estimate the cost to the National Health Service of making rigid containers for clinical waste mandatory.

The requirement to provide rigid containers for clinical waste results from a European Community Directive. The Directive only applies where clinical waste is transported on public road or rail. This is then the responsibility of the waste contractor. However, if the contractor is faced with increased costs to replace containers, this is likely to be reflected in the contract price charged to the trust. Industry is looking into whether their existing systems meet these requirements. The outcome of this is awaited.

ME Specialist Consultants

Mr. Anthony D. Wright: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what measures he is taking to increase the number of qualified ME specialist consultants in the NHS. [63229]

Mr. Milburn: Consultants from a number of different specialties are involved in the care of patients with Myalgic Encephalomyelitis. Since February 1995, the Specialty Workforce Advisory Group (SWAG) has been advising the Government about the numbers of doctors in higher specialist training needed in all Hospital and Community Health Service specialties to meet estimated requirements for consultants four to six years hence. SWAG's planning process takes account of the views of the National Health Service and the medical profession about service needs. It is for NHS trusts and health authorities to determine locally how the consultants, produced following national workforce planning, are deployed.

Scottish Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will list *(a)* by programme over £50,000 and *(b)* the total spending by his Department in Scotland on the identifiable spending areas detailed in Table 7.6A of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 1997–98 (Cmnd 3601); which of these programmes will fall solely or jointly under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament; and what arrangements are in place to transfer control of funds for these projects to the Scottish Executive or Parliament; [63294]

(2) what assessment he has made of the programmes which it will be ultra vires for his Department to fund or have sole responsibility for after devolution; if he will list these programmes; and if he will make a statement; [63295]

(3) how much is spent annually by his Department on research programmes in Scotland; and what proportion of this funding will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament after devolution. [63293]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* Under the terms of the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish Ministers will assume responsibility for a range of devolved functions which will in part depend on secondary legislation which has yet to be passed. The Department is reviewing its programmes, including research components, in the light of the Scotland Act. It is too early to provide a clear picture of the extent to which programme expenditure which is currently administered by the Department may relate to functions which will transfer to Scottish Ministers. Work is taking place to establish the extent of any such expenditure and to assess the need for any consequential transfer of funds to the Scottish Ministers.

Elderly Patients (Emergency Readmissions)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *210*, concerning hospital readmissions, if he will list the figures for the total number of people aged over 75 years discharged in each quarter since emergency readmissions statistics were first collected, *(a)* in total and *(b)* by region. [63423]

Mr. Milburn: Copies of the information requested are available in Library.

The number of patients who are readmitted to hospital is related to the number of patients who have been discharged. The number of patients aged over 75 and over discharged from hospital and the per cent. of patients aged over 75 and over readmitted to hospital within 28 days have also been provided.

Food Poisoning

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) how many outbreaks of food poisoning there were in each county in each of the last five years; [63519]

(2) if he will publish a monthly breakdown of outbreaks of food poisoning in each of the last five years. [63333]

Ms Jowell: Data on general outbreaks of foodborne illness, broken down by health authority, are published on a monthly basis in the Public Health Laboratory Service's Communicable Disease Report (CDR), copies of which are available in the Library. CDR also publishes quarterly data by local authority. Copies of CDR and data for specific food poisoning organisms can be found on PHLS' website; the address is www.phls.co.uk.

Primary Care Groups

Mr. Key: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will place in the Library all guidance given to health authorities on *(a)* methods of recruitment and *(b)* criteria for recruitment of lay members of primary care groups. [63179]

Mr. Milburn: Copies of all guidance on Primary Care Groups are available in the Library.

Mixed-sex Hospital Wards

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many mental health hospitals or psychiatric units in England have mixed-sex wards; and if he will list them. [63789]

Mr. Hutton: The information requested is not available centrally. However, the hon. Member may wish to consult the "Report of Review of Health Authorities' Target Dates for Meeting Three Objectives to Eliminate Mixed Sex Hospital Accommodation", which was published in February 1998.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Millennium (Emergency Cover)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans his Department has to contract with the armed services to provide emergency cover over the millennium period; and what estimate he has made of the cost of that cover. [62578]

Mr. Mandelson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *20*.

Insolvency Service

Mr. Vaz: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the fees charged by the Insolvency Service. [63095]

Dr. Howells: Insolvency legislation provides for fees to be charged by Official Receivers in connection with the administration of bankruptcies and compulsory liquidations. Fees are also charged in relation to the operation of the Insolvency Services Account, for the authorisation of insolvency practitioners and for the performance by the Secretary of State of his general duties under the Insolvency Act 1986.

The Insolvency Service publishes an annual report and accounts which includes information about its fee income, copies of which are available in the Library of the House.

Millennium Dome (Sponsors)

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) how much has *(a)* been paid or *(b)* been agreed to be paid by the New Millennium Experience Company to IMG; [62779]

(2) what is the value of sponsorship money for the Millennium Exhibition raised by IMG. [62703]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given below to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope).

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) which sponsors of the Millennium Dome have been recruited through the services of the International Management Group; [63113]

(2) on what date and for what reason the contract between the New Millennium Experience Company and the International Management Group was terminated; [63114]

(3) in respect of which of the sponsoring companies of the Millennium Dome a success fee has been paid to the International Management Group. [63115]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* During the development of the Millennium Experience project, prior to the establishment of the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC), the Millennium Commission invited companies to tender to provide independent consultancy advice on the achievability of the sponsorship target and to quote their rates for raising sponsorship. IMG were the lowest bidder on both counts. Subsequent negotiations of the detail of the contract for raising sponsorship were conducted from late February 1997, by Millennium Central (the previous name of the NMEC). The key terms of the contract were reported to the House in my answers to the hon. Member for Herstmere (Mr. Clappison) on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *324* and the right hon. Member for Horsham (Mr. Maude) on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *327*. At that stage both the NMEC and the Millennium Experience project were still in development—the sponsorship task; the nature of the offer to potential sponsors; and the overall sponsorship strategy had yet to be finally decided. Subsequent refinements of the task impacted on the nature of the work IMG were required to undertake. At the same time, NMEC's own in-house Commercial Department grew in expertise and strength. They are now well placed to deliver the remaining sponsorship necessary to meet the target of £150 million.

In light of these developments, the NMEC and IMG have over the last few months been considering the terms of their original agreement. The parties have decided to terminate the arrangement by mutual agreement and NMEC have recorded their appreciation for the considerable contribution IMG has made to the project. The Legal documentation is currently being concluded. Details of the termination are commercially confidential. However, the fee payable to IMG represents the value of their support for, and assistance with, the NMEC's sponsorship work to date and is significantly less than the prospective fee of £9 million which I reported to the House on 17 July 1997, *Official Report*, column *324*.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the sponsorship obtained for the Millennium Dome by *(a)* the International Management Group and *(b)* the New Millennium Experience Company by (i) name of sponsor and (ii) the amount secured. [62650]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer given above to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope).

Millennium Compliance

Mr. Laurence Robertson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to ensure that companies are able to ensure the millennium compliance of their computers; how much money he has spent on this; what percentage of the money has been given to Taskforce 2000; and if he will make a statement. [62412]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* The Department has set up Action 2000 to lead the work on behalf of Government in ensuring that businesses take effective measures to make their computer systems compliant with millennium date requirements. DTI has provided Action 2000 with £19.3 million of funding to support the work, of which some £9.0 million has been spent so far. Taskforce 2000 is a separate organisation which has received £0.35 million from the Department.

Competitive Tendering (Departmental Projects)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reasons it is not normal departmental policy to disclose the names of firms participating in competitive tendering for departmental projects. [63493]

Dr. Howells: The Code of Practice on Access to Government Information is the benchmark by which we make public details of competitive tendering. The Department would not normally make known the names of individual bidders participating in such an exercise. It would be generally considered to prejudice the legitimate commercial interests of such persons. However if we were asked to reveal the names we would consult each of the companies involved and ask whether they were content for their identity to be revealed. If the companies wished their names to remain confidential we could not release this information unless there were an overriding public interest.

Arms Exports

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures are being taken to incorporate arms brokerage within arms trade regulations covering United Kingdom companies. [63434]

Mrs. Roche: The Government do already impose controls on trafficking and brokering under the United Nations Act 1946 where this is necessary to implement a binding United Nations decision.

Section 3.3 of the White Paper on Strategic Export Controls, which was published on 1 July 1998, contains proposals to extend controls on trafficking and brokering to:

countries subject to other types of embargo, whether as a result of non-binding decisions of the UN or decisions of the EU, Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe or the UK Government;

certain types of equipment, the export from the UK of which, has been banned because of evidence that goods of the same type have been used in torture;

missiles capable of a range of at least 300 km.

The proposals in Section 3.1 of the White Paper, to extend current controls on weapons of mass destruction, also include trafficking and brokering activity.

Now that the formal consultation process following publication of the White Paper has ended, we are reviewing all the proposals contained in the White Paper in the light of the responses received.

Miller Civil Engineering Ltd.

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the official trading status of Miller Civil Engineering Ltd. [63317]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* The latest accounts delivered by Miller Civil Engineering Limited and made up to 31 December 1997 include the following statement in the Directors' report.

"The company did not trade on its own account during the year but acted as agent on behalf of The Miller Group Limited whose principal activities included civil engineering".

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Gray: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if it his policy that Ireland should retain its Objective 1 status when the zones for EU aid are re-drawn. [63178]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* Decisions on EU Objective 1 funding for other member states are not a matter for the UK Government.

Telephone Numbers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many nine digit telephone numbers in the 0800 range have *(a)* been issued, *(b)* remain available to be issued and *(c)* are currently in use; and when the full range is expected to be in use. [63467]

Mrs. Roche: The 0800 nine-digit range was allocated by BT to itself in the time of its monopoly before 1984. When Oftel took over the administration of the Numbering Scheme from BT in 1994 unused portions ("blocks") of the 0800 nine digit range were recovered from BT and issued as ten digit numbers to other operators. BT has currently allocated over 80 per cent. of the 0800 nine digit capacity. No other operator has 0800 nine digit capacity.

Because of BT's dominance in its holding of 0800 numbers BT was required to stop allocating new nine digit numbers to their customers from July 1997. Since that date BT has been issuing 0800 ten digit numbers out of allocations made to them by Oftel. The remaining unused 0800 nine digit numbers cannot be made available to other operators under current arrangements as they are in BT blocks. They therefore remain frozen pending the outcome of the current Oftel consultation on freephone numbers.

The up to date figure for the quantity of 0800 nine digit numbers in use is not information held by Oftel as it relates to BT and its customers. However, it is generally recognised that between 80,000 and 100,000 such numbers are in use.

It is the intention of the current consultation on freephone numbers to decide on an arrangement that will make available the full range of 0800.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many responses have been received to OFTEL's consultation document, Freephone Numbers: Options for the Future, from *(a)* businesses, *(b)* network operators, *(c)* telecom advisory committees and *(d)* others; and how many responses from each group (i) supported and (ii) opposed options 1 and/or 2. [63522]

Mrs. Roche: Oftel has received submissions to its consultation document Freephone Numbers: Options for the Future from 168 respondees. Responses are divided into the following categories:

a) Businesses—128 responses

Consisting of 66 supporting the Freephone User Group (FUG) responses, 26 supporting the Direct Marketing Association responses and 36 other business responses.

b) Network operators—8 responses

c) Telecommunications Advisory Groups—21 responses

d) Others—11 responses

Consisting of 2 Consultants, 2 Consumer Groups, 5 Trade Bodies and 3 residential users. The numbers of responses that (i) supported and (ii) opposed options 1 and/or 2 are shown in the table below.

	Support		*Oppose*	
	Option 1	*Option 2*	*Option 1*	*Option 2*
(a) Businesses	2	3	93	97
FUG	0	0	66	66
DMA	0	0	26	26
Others	0	3	0	5
(b) Operators	1	6	3	0
(c) TACs	0	19	1	0
(d) Others	2	4	2	2
Total	5	32	98	99

Hallmarking

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on forthcoming changes to the Hallmarking Act 1973. [64080]

Mr. Mandelson: The Hallmarking (Hallmarking Act Amendment) Regulations and the Hallmarking (Hallmarking Act Amendment) Order 1998 were laid in Parliament on Friday 4 December 1998.

These will align UK law with EU single market rules whilst ensuring that UK manufacturers can remain competitive at home and in Europe. The specific changes are as follows:

Section 2 of the Act is amended so as to recognise certain hallmarks from other European countries as "approved hallmarks". This follows a 1994 European Court of Justice Judgment in the case of Houtwipper (Case C-293/93) which ruled that Member States which prohibited the sale of articles of precious metal not hallmarked in accordance with national laws would not be in breach of single market rules provided that such articles did not already bear hallmarks struck by an independent body in accordance with the legislation of the exporting Member State, containing information which was equivalent to that provided by the hallmarks of the importing Member State and which was intelligible to consumers in that Member State. As a result, articles of precious metal bearing hallmarks which meet these criteria will be able to be offered for sale in the UK without, as previously, having to be re-hallmarked.

The distinction between UK manufactured articles and imports is to be ended so that the same marks will be struck on both UK and imported articles. This, also, is designed to align UK law with single market rules.

The range of finenesses to which articles can be hallmarked in the UK is increased to include new standards (both higher and lower) in addition to those traditionally recognised in the UK. This will ensure that UK manufacturers can compete on an equal basis with European counterparts. Consumers also stand to benefit from being able to purchase a wider range of items of jewellery and other precious articles of a standard of purity which could not previously be sold as precious articles in the UK.

The fineness of UK hallmarked articles will from now on be expressed millesimally. This means that the striking of traditional marks such as the crown for gold and the orb for platinum will become voluntary. This change will make hallmarks more readily understandable to consumers. This is especially important in view of the new increased range of finenesses.

The requirement for the date letter to be struck alongside traditional UK hallmarks is ended although the date letter can continue to be struck on a voluntary basis. This change will place UK manufacturers on an equal footing with their European competitors.

Finally, the date before which articles are exempt from hallmarking will be changed from 1900 to 1920 in response to concerns within the antiques trade about the inability to auction in the UK fine art works made between 1900 and 1920 which do not bear approved hallmarks.

Science and Technology

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what actions he will take to ensure that Science and Technology issues are taken into account in the work of Government Departments. [64081]

Mr. Mandelson: I am today announcing a new group of Ministers who will have responsibility for supporting me in delivering my responsibility for science, engineering and technology across Government. I am looking to the new group to build on the work of the Ministerial Foresight Group—driving forward the Foresight Programme will be at the top of its agenda—and to ensure that the Government takes full advantage of UK scientific excellence in delivering its objectives.

The new group, which will be chaired by the Minister for Science, Lord Sainsbury, will have the following membership:

Minister	
Lord Sainsbury	DTI (Chairman)
Jeff Rooker MP	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
Peter Kilfoyle MP	Cabinet Office
Alan Howarth MP	Department for Culture, Media and Sport
George Mudie MP	Department for Education and Employment
Alan Meale MP	Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions
Derek Fatchett MP	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
Lady Hayman	Department of Health
Paul Boateng MP	Home Office
George Foulkes MP	Department for International Development
Adam Ingram MP	Northern Ireland Office
John Denham MP	Department of Social Security
John Battle MP	DTI
Geoffrey Robinson MP	HM Treasury
Helen Liddell MP	Scottish Office
Peter Hain MP	Welsh Office

The Minister for Defence Procurement will receive the papers and attend for relevant items and other Ministers will be invited where issues cover their areas of responsibility.

Post Office

Mr. Chidgey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if responsibility for the Pathway project will be vested in the Post Office under his proposals for the future of the Post Office. [63702]

Mr. Ian McCartney: This project to automate the payment of social security benefit payments and a range of other services at post offices is being undertaken jointly by the Benefits Agency and Post Office Counters Ltd. under the Private Finance Initiative, with ICL Pathway as the private sector partner.

The proposals announced by my right hon. Friend on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 21–24, on the future of the Post Office do not affect existing responsibilities for this project.

Wassenaar Arrangement

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if officials from his Department were present at the December meeting of the Wassenaar Arrangement in Vienna. [63523]

Mr. Mandelson: The Department of Trade and Industry is regularly represented at meetings of participants in the Wassenaar Arrangement. Two officials of the DTI's Export Control Organisation attended the Plenary meeting of the Arrangement in Vienna on 2 and 3 December 1998.

Minimum Wage

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received on the range of training programmes designated as accredited training under the draft national minimum wage regulations; and if he will make a statement on the reasons which underlay the decision not to designate as accredited training programmes the full list of programmes recommended by the Low Pay Commission. [63701]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government have received a number of representations on the draft National Minimum Wage Regulations dealing with the training programmes which might be designated as accredited training.

The Low Pay Commission did not define accredited training and the programmes it should cover. It is important that the programmes to be designated as accredited training should be verifiable. The draft

Regulations, therefore, proposed that courses specified in Schedule 2(a) to the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, training in Scotland leading to an award by the Scottish Qualifications Authority and equivalent vocational training in Northern Ireland might be defined as accredited training. The consultation exercise on the draft Regulations invited suggestions for alternative forms of training which might be included and these are being considered.

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the impact of the national minimum wage on the activity holiday industry; what representations he has received from the industry in relation to the draft national minimum wage regulations; and if he will make a statement. [63698]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government share the Low Pay Commission's view that the national minimum wage at the levels we propose is sensible and will not adversely affect business competitiveness or employment. We have received a number of representations from the activity holiday industry and others on the draft national minimum wage regulations. We are currently considering those representations and will present the regulations to Parliament for approval shortly.

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research his Department has conducted on the commercial cost of board and lodging; and if he will make a statement on the level to be included in the national minimum wage regulations for accommodation. [63780]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Low Pay Commission took evidence on current practice on the provision of board and lodging during its consultation exercise on the national minimum wage. It recommended that a maximum figure of £20 per week, which was not intended to be a commercial valuation, should be set for any deduction for the cost of accommodation provided by an employer. The draft national minimum wage regulations provide that, when assessing compliance with the national minimum wage, the maximum offset allowable for accommodation provided by the employer will be £2.85 per day.

The Government accepted the Commission's recommendations, subject to consultation on the practicalities of implementation. We are currently considering the representations, including those on the level of the deduction for living accommodation and will present the regulations to Parliament for approval shortly.

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations his Department has received on the amount that is deductible for meals provided by an employer under the draft national minimum wage regulations; and if he will make a statement. [63777]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Government have received a number of representations during the consultation exercise on the draft national minimum wage regulations on the amount that can be deducted for meals provided by an employer.

We are currently considering those representations and will present the regulations to the House for approval shortly.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63884]

Mr. Mandelson: I have no plans to include Irish as a category in my Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment.

SOCIAL SECURITY

SERPS

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what estimate he has made of the savings which will result from the decision to halve SERPS for widowers and widows whose spouse dies on or after 6 April 2000. [61150]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* The estimated savings from the 1986 Social Security Act provisions which halve inherited SERPS from April 2000 are £60 million in 2000–2001, increasing to £2.3 billion by 2020.

Source:

Government Actuary's Department.

Notes:

1. Savings are gross of income related benefit changes.
2. Figures are in 1998 prices and are rounded to the nearest £10 million (£100 million for the 2020 figure).
3. The proposed new schemes for widows and widowers under State Pension age have not been taken into account.
4. Cases where the widower is over State Pension age but the deceased partner is under State Pension age are included in the estimates.

New Deal

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will publish a breakdown of the £40 better off figures cited for lone parents who take paid employment as a result of the New Deal programme prototypes by amounts of *(a)* child benefit, *(b)* maintenance, *(c)* family credit, *(d)* net income from earnings, *(e)* housing benefit and *(f)* council tax benefit; and if he will break down the equivalent income figures which applied before paid employment was taken. [61840]

Angela Eagle *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* The information is set out in the table.

Average amounts paid to new deal for lone parents sample cases (March 1998)

£ per week

	Average amounts: (Income Support claim)	*Average amounts: (Family Credit claim)*
Child Benefit	22.35	22.35
Maintenance	6.96	6.96
Family Credit	n/a	64.54

Average amounts paid to new deal for lone parents sample cases (March 1998)

£ per week

	Average amounts: (Income Support claim)	*Average amounts: (Family Credit claim)*
Income Support	67.72	n/a
Net income from earnings	n/a	78.49
Housing Benefit	54.10	25.08
Council Tax Benefit	8.60	2.10
All Income	159.72	199.51

Notes:
1. Figures are rounded to the nearest penny. As such totals may differ slightly from the sum of the component parts.
2. Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit amounts are calculated using an average amount of eligible rent and Council Tax Benefit appropriate to lone parents in Great Britain.
3. It is assumed that claimants will take up their full entitlement to other benefits.
4. Based on a sample of 296 claimants who have moved from Income Support to Family Credit, taken at the end of March 1998.

Jobseeker's Allowance

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people leaving the New Deal to claim benefits other than jobseeker's allowance have made such claims *(a)* by month and *(b)* by type of benefit claim, from January up to the latest date for which figures are available. [63274]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

The New Deal for unemployed people aged between 18 years and 24 years was launched in 12 Pathfinder areas on 5 January 1998 and introduced nationally on 6 April 1998.

Numbers transferring from the New Deal for 18–24 year olds to other benefits

1998	*Numbers transferred to other benefits*	*Percentage of total leavers*
January-March	200	7.7
April-June	1,140	6.9
July-September	3,010	5.9

Notes:
1. Up to the end of September 1998, the latest date for which figures are available, 4,350 young people transferred from the New Deal to other benefits.
2. The numbers leaving are collated on a quarterly rather than monthly basis.
3. Information about which benefit they claimed is not currently collected.
4. Data about the New Deal for the long term unemployed will be published early next year.

Millennium (Emergency Cover)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans his Department has to contract with the armed services to provide emergency cover over the millennium period; and what estimate he has made of the cost of that cover. [62577]

Mr. Timms: I refer the hon. Member to the Written Answer that the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, my hon. Friend the Member for Knowsley, North and Sefton, East (Mr. Howarth) gave the hon. Member on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *20*.

Parenthood

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures he has introduced to assist with the additional costs faced during early years of parenthood. [63505]

Angela Eagle: Since November this year, an extra £2.50 a week has been made available to less well off families with children under age 11, through the income-related benefits. This is on top of the largest ever increase in Child Benefit for eldest or only children, up £2.95 a week from next April. A simultaneous increase in the family premium, from £11.05 to £13.90, will ensure that those on income-related benefits receive the full amount of the Child Benefit increase.

In June 1998, two enhancements were introduced to the childcare disregard scheme in the in-work benefits (Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit). The maximum amount of weekly childcare costs allowed was increased from £60 to £100 for families who incur childcare costs for two or more children of qualifying age, and the age limit for children was extended by one year to the September following the child's 12th birthday. These families will receive further help next October through the introduction of Working Families Tax credit and associated childcare tax credit.

Severely Disabled Children

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what measures he has introduced to increase the level of assistance made available to support severely disabled young children. [63510]

Mr. Timms: We have announced several significant improvements in support for disabled children. In our consultation document, 'A New Contract for Welfare - Support for Disabled People', we announced our intention to introduce a Disability Income Guarantee for families on income-related benefits with disabled children who have the highest care needs as well as the extension of the higher rate mobility component of Disability Living Allowance to children aged three and four. From 1 July 1998, payments awarded under the Vaccine Damages Payments Scheme were increased from £30,000 to £40,000.

Family Credit

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what are the *(a)* numbers and *(b)* percentages of families claiming family credit where the family credit payment is equal to (i) up to 75 per cent. of the weekly wage, (ii) from 76 to 100 per cent. of the weekly wage and (iii) over 100 per cent. of the weekly wage; and if he will break down these figures between two parent and single parent families. [63501]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Family credit recipients at May 1998: weekly family credit (FC) as a proportion of gross weekly earnings

	All families		Two parent families		Lone parent families	
	Number of cases (Thousand)	Percentage of all FC claimants	Number of cases (Thousand)	Percentage of all two parent families receiving FC	Number of cases (Thousand)	Percentage of all lone parent families receiving FC
All families receiving FC	767	100	390	100	377	100
FC equals up to 75 per cent. of gross earnings	433	56.5	236	60.6	197	52.2
FC equals 76 to 100 per cent. of gross earnings	91	11.9	34	8.6	58	15.3
FC over 100 per cent. of gross earnings	243	31.6	120	30.8	123	32.5

Notes:
1. Figures are based on a 5 per cent. sample of Family Credit awards and as such are subject to a degree of sampling error
2. Caseload figures are rounded to the nearest thousand and may not sum to totals

Source:
Family Credit 5 per cent. sample of awards

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate, on the basis of the Family Resources Survey, and pooling years of data, the number of benefit units which contain at least one employee and at least one dependent child, whose total income as measured for the purposes of the Working Families Tax Credit in each £5,000 band up to £30,000 and above, indicating separately the figures for (i) lone parent families, (ii) two parent families with one child, (iii) two parent families with two children and (iv) two parent families with three or more children, providing within each category separate figures for those in (A) firms of up to 25 employees and (B) firms of 25 employees or more. [63418]

Angela Eagle: The information could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Child Support

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) which of the considerations which can affect child support maintenance payments under the current procedures will not come within the definition of exceptional expenses that tribunals will be allowed to take into account under the new proposals set out in "Children First"; [63894]

(2) if he will define the term, substantial change, used in Chapter 5, paragraph 18, of the Green Paper, Children First; what representations he has received concerning this term; and if he will publish those representations; [63890]

(3) what plans he has to alter the amount by which a weekly maintenance payment must change before the maintenance liability is reset by the CSA. [63891]

Angela Eagle: A full analysis of responses to the Green Paper has not yet been completed. There have so far been over 1,500 written representations and comments are still being received. The outcome of the consultation process, together with our detailed proposals for reforming the child support system, will be published in due course.

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the annual running costs of the proposed new Child Support Service outlined in the Green Paper, "Children First"; and what plans he has for a new computer system to handle the new procedures. [63892]

Angela Eagle: It is not possible to produce accurate estimates of running costs until the shape of the new Child Support service is finalised.

Support for a reformed Child Support service would be developed as a key part of the Department's wider plans for modernising its computer systems.

National Insurance

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if the NIRS II computer system is currently able to handle all inquiries about national insurance numbers. [63895]

Mr. Timms: The Contributions Agency is able to use the new National Insurance Recording System (NIRS2) to answer all inquiries about National Insurance numbers where National Insurance numbers are already held. This has been available to staff since the 23 July 1998.

The NIRS2 facilities for issuing new National Insurance numbers for both adults and juveniles are being piloted currently, and should be implemented nationally in the near future.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal (Expenditure)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the net expenditure effects over the next four years of the New Deal for *(a)* youth and long-term unemployed, *(b)* lone parents and *(c)* people with disabilities. [63504]

Angela Eagle: I have been asked to reply.

The Government published their latest detailed estimates for the allocation of Windfall Tax receipts, which are being used to fund the Welfare to Work programme, in the pre-Budget report last month (Cm 4076—table 4.1).

The Windfall Tax raised £5.2 billion. Half of this, or £2.6 billion, has been allocated to the New Deal for 18 to 24 year olds. It has already given opportunities to 186,000 young people.

£0.5 billion will be spent on the New Deal for long term unemployed people aged over 25 which started in June. From 30 November it has been extended in 28 pilots providing more intensive interventions.

£190 million has been allocated to the New Deal for Lone Parents which became available nationally to all lone parents on Income Support on 26 October. It was previously available in eight prototype areas from July 1997 and nationally to lone parents making new claims to Income Support from April 1998. During these two phases 87 per cent. of those attending initial interviews decided to participate in the programme.

A further £210 million has been allocated to the New Deal for Disabled People. This includes £10 million additional funding announced on 28 October.

All aspects of the New Deal programme are being comprehensively analysed. However, it is too early to make estimates of the net expenditure effects of these programmes, and it would be imprudent to make arbitrary reductions in our estimates of programme expenditure. The objective of our Welfare to Work programme is to increase the level of employment in the economy: doing so will benefit individuals in work, the wider economy, and the public finances.

Education Channel

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the broadcasting companies with which he has had discussions over the establishment of a new education channel. [63319]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* The Department has had discussions with a number of broadcasting companies about a range of issues associated with educational broadcasting, including the possible future role of education channels in supporting teaching and learning.

A number of broadcasting companies have expressed interest in the provision of digital broadcasting services to support the GCSE curriculum. Following the recent technology exercise by my Department, it is expected that final decisions will be announced in the New Year.

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what discussions he has had with *(a)* the BBC, *(b)* Granada and *(c)* United News and Media over the establishment of a new education channel. [63318]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* Discussions take place on a regular basis with broadcasting companies, including the BBC, Granada and United News and Media, about a range of issues associated with educational broadcasting. Companies with a broadcasting or transmission licence and experience in the provision of educational broadcast material have also been invited to submit expressions of interest in the provision of specific digital broadcasting services to support the GCSE curriculum, and a competitive tendering exercise for the provision of such services is now in progress.

University Students (Ethnic Minorities)

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proportion of students attending university in the current academic year are from ethnic minority groups, broken down by individual ethnic group. [62036]

Mr. Mudie: The most recently available data on ethnicity of higher education students in higher education institutions in the UK are for 1997–98 and are given below:

Enrolments by home domiciled higher education students in higher education institutions in the UK[1] 1997–98

Ethnic group	*Full time (thousand)*	*Percentage of total known*	*Part time (thousand)*	*Percentage of total known*
White	763.4	86.4	385.6	91.3
Black Caribbean	10.5	1.2	6.1	1.5
Black African	15.5	1.8	7.0	1.7
Black Other	4.6	0.5	2.9	0.7
Indian	33.6	3.8	6.0	1.4
Pakistani	17.3	2.0	2.7	0.6
Bangladeshi	4.6	0.5	0.6	0.2
Chinese	8.7	1.0	2.1	0.5
Asian Other	10.2	1.2	4.2	1.0
Other	15.0	1.7	5.2	1.2
Total known	883.4	100	422.4	100
Ethnicity unknown[2]	107.4	—	120.6	—
Total HE students	990.8	—	543.0	—

[1] Excluding HE students in FE institutions
[2] Including students for whom information was not provided or not collected

University for Industry

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to allow the University for Industry to provide courses for students at levels 3 and 4; and how funding will be provided. [62549]

Mr. Mudie: There are no plans for the University for Industry to be a direct learning provider. It will rather act as a broker of learning opportunities at all levels. These will be provided in a variety of ways, including by further and higher education institutions.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what resources, in addition to the announced start up costs, will be allocated to the University for Industry in each of the years 1999 to 2002; and from which budget head within his Department these resources will come. [62602]

Mr. Mudie: £40 million has been allocated to the University for Industry for 1999–2000. The Department plans to announce decisions on further funding in the Departmental Report which is due to be published in the spring. Any such resources will be allocated from the

Comprehensive Spending Review total for the Department for Education and Employment. Expenditure will be from a specific University for Industry subhead.

EU Students (Undergraduate Courses)

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many EU students commenced undergraduate courses at British universities in the academic year 1998–99; and what was the total projected income expected from their tuition fees. [62604]

Mr. Mudie: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *91*, which gave our forecasts of the number of entrants from EU in 1998–99 and their expected contribution towards their tuition fees. Actual figures are not yet available.

Dental Students

Mr. Viggers: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will extend the scope of student loans for dental students and others who are required to undertake extended training. [62935]

Mr. Mudie: Under our new system of student support, dental and medical students in the first four years of their course will have access to the same loan, grant and fees support as all other students. In years five and beyond the Department of Health will meet their tuition fees and they will receive approximately half of their maintenance support through means tested NHS bursaries and the rest in non-means tested loans.

Students on other long courses are entitled to the same loan, grant and fees support as all other students.

Under our new system, students who have to study for more than a certain number of weeks in the academic year will be eligible, as now, for additional support for these extra weeks. This support will be in the form of an additional loan, repayable on the same terms as the basic maintenance loan.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to mitigate the effect of high debt levels on dental students incurred through the student loan scheme; and if he will make a statement. [63371]

Mr. Mudie: Under our new system of student support, dental and medical students in the first four years of their course will have access to the same loan, grant and fees support as all other students. In years five and beyond the Department of Health will meet their tuition fees and they will receive approximately half of their maintenance support through means tested NHS bursaries and the rest in non-means tested loans from the DfEE.

Students on the new income contingent loans scheme will benefit from the fairer repayment system which links repayments directly to graduates' income. No repayments are made until their income reaches a threshold, initially set at £10,000, and thereafter they are calculated as a percentage of income above that level. This will ensure that dental students, and others with larger loans to repay will have affordable repayments linked directly to their earnings.

Dental and other students who entered higher education before 1998–99 and who take out five or more old style loans will repay these loans over a period of seven years compared to five years for borrowers with four or less loans. Borrowers may apply to defer repayment for a year at a time if their income does not exceed the earnings related threshold, which for 1998–99 is set at £17,784 per annum.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the average level of debt incurred by dental students through the student loan scheme when they graduate. [63372]

Mr. Mudie: This information is not collected centrally. Data taken from "Statistics of Education, Student Support for 1996–97", prepared by the Government Statistical Service and published by the Department for Education and Employment, show that borrowers entering repayment in 1997–98 owed an average of £2,180 to the Student Loans Company.

Mature Students

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received about the problems facing mature students with family obligations who are not eligible for income support or housing benefit; and if he will review the policy of Her Majesty's Government on this issue. [62289]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has received a number of representations about the circumstances of individual mature students. The main source of support for full-time students is the student support system; mandatory awards, student loans and Access Funds. There are additional allowances as part of the mandatory award for students with dependants. These allowances are increased for single students with dependants and for students who have to maintain a second home whilst [illegible]. They will be retained as supplementary grants [illegible]100 per cent. loans for maintenance costs are introduced in 1999–2000.

Most full-time students are excluded from entitlement to benefits such as Income Support and Housing Benefit. Some benefits continue to be made available to certain students in vulnerable groups, including students who are solely responsible for a child. Partners of students who are not full-time students themselves may claim benefits on behalf of the couple. In assessing entitlement to benefit, the Benefits Agency and/or the relevant local authority will take account of all income available to the student, including the maintenance grant and student loan.

New Deal (East Hampshire)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal Gateway in the East Hampshire District Council area since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [63031]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The latest Government Statistical Service figures for clients in the Mid Hants Unit of Delivery show that to the end of September 1998:

(a) 206 young people had entered the Gateway and 41 have secured unsubsidised employment

(b) 17 had joined one of the four options.

This breaks down to: 2 on the Employment option; 3 on the Voluntary Sector option; and 12 on the Full-Time Education and Training option.

Medical Students

Dr. Gibson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to monitor the impact of the new student funding system on recruitment to higher education institutions of students studying for professions allied to medicine and pre-clinical medicine. [62640]

Mr. Mudie: Responsibility for the support arrangements for new students on courses in the professions allied to medicine and for students on nursing and midwifery courses transferred to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health in September this year. I understand that his Department is monitoring the effectiveness of student support for the professions allied to medicine in safeguarding supply. Also from September 1998, arrangements for supporting new medical and dental students became a shared responsibility with the Department of Health. These students will be supported under the main student support system for the first four years of their course and by the Department of Health from year 5 onwards. Medicine has always been a popular subject which is heavily over-subscribed and the situation will continue to be closely monitored by the Department of Health.

Extensive analysis is underway to assess and monitor the impact of our new higher education funding policies in general, using application and entrant data. A range of ongoing and planned research projects will also examine participation in higher education. A combination of internal and external studies will be undertaken.

New Deal (Southampton)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal Gateway in the Southampton City Council area since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [63123]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The latest Government Statistical Service figures for clients in the Southampton and South-West Hampshire Unit of Delivery show that to the end of September 1998:

(a) 751 young people had entered the Gateway and 97 have secured unsubsidised employment

(b) 108 had joined one of the four options.

This breaks down to: 29 on the Employment option; 7 on the Voluntary Sector option; 1 on Environment Task Force; and 71 on the Full-Time Education and Training option.

I am encouraged by the positive start made in the Southampton and SW Hampshire Unit of Delivery, which reflects the encouraging start to the programme overall.

Single Regeneration Budget

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what steps the Government are taking to ensure local co-ordination between the Single Regeneration Budget and the New Deal. [62343]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* The guidelines for Round 5 of the Single Regeneration Budget required bidders to show how their proposals would support national policies and programmes to improve employability. Bidders should also clearly show how the SRB contribution will promote synergy by reinforcing or adding value to other publicly funded programmes.

Government Offices for the Regions have been asked to consider with potential bidders how far their proposals can support and increase the effectiveness of the New Deals and other aspects of the Welfare to Work programme.

Outline bids have now been received and Government Offices will be assessing the links with national programmes including New Deal. The Employment Service will be involved in the assessment of these bids.

NVQs

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the take up by sector and subject of NVQ Level 4 in England and Wales in the last year for which figures are available; and how many candidates were registered with the awarding bodies for NVQ Level 4. [63680]

Mr. Mudie: The information about take up of NVQ Level 4 by the 11 framework sectors, and by subjects is contained in the following tables.

Candidates are not compelled to register with an awarding body to say they are working towards an NVQ. Their first contact with an awarding body may well be shortly before their assessment.

1997–98 financial year

NVQ framework sectors	*Level 4 awards*
1 Tending Animals, Plants and Land	61
2 Extracting and Providing Natural Resources	0
3 Constructing	36
4 Engineering	222
5 Manufacturing	2
6 Transporting	9
7 Providing Goods and Services	157
8 Providing Health, Social and Protective Services	429
9 Providing Business Services	7,737
10 Communicating	164
11 Developing and Extending Knowledge and Skills	1,323
Total	10,140

Level 4 awards during financial year 1997–98 sorted in descending order

Framework sector	*Title*	*Level*	*Total certificates*
9	Management	4	3,739
9	Accounting	4	3,445
11	Training and Development (Learning Development)	4	996
9	Administration	4	386
11	Training and Development (Human Resource Development)	4	322
8	Guidance	4	113
10	Newspaper Journalism (Writing)	4	110
8	Managing Landfill Operations (Special Waste)	4	96
9	Business Counselling	4	81
8	Managing Transfer Operations (Special Waste)	4	76
7	Wholesaling, Warehousing and Stores	4	72
4	Engineering Manufacturing	4	66
4	Engineering Manufacture (Designing)	4	57
8	Occupational Health and Safety Practice	4	49
4	Engineering Manufacture (Production Planning)	4	41
1	Agriculture (Livestock Management)	4	34
8	Managing Landfill Operations (Biodegradable Waste)	4	32
3	Building Site Management	4	30
4	Engineering Manufacture (Testing)	4	29
9	Pensions Administration	4	29
1	Agriculture and Commercial Horticulture (Crop Management)	4	21
7	Travel Services (Management)	4	19
8	Care	4	16
10	Newspaper Journalism (Press Photography)	4	16
9	Marketing Products and Services	4	13
10	Radio Production	4	13
7	On-Licensed Premises Management	4	12
8	Managing Treatment Operations (Special Waste)	4	12
10	Periodical Journalism (Writing)	4	12
7	Catering and Hospitality Management (Food Preparation and Cooking)	4	11
7	Travel Services (Leisure and Business Travel)	4	10
9	Procurement	4	10
9	School Administration	4	10
4	Engineering Manufacture	4	8
4	Engineering Manufacture (Designing and Testing)	4	7
7	Field Sales Management	4	7
7	Retail Operations	4	7
10	Newspaper Journalism (Production Journalism)	4	7
3	Building Maintenance and Estates Service	4	6
4	Engineering Manufacture and Production Planning	4	6
6	Fishing Vessel Operations (Limited Area)	4	6
8	Advice	4	6
8	Managing Landfill Operations—Special Waste	4	6
8	Managing Transfer Operations—Clinical or Special Waste	4	6
8	Managing Incineration Operations (Special Waste)	4	5
9	International Trade and Services	4	5
9	Purchasing	4	5
7	Information Systems Development	4	4
7	Spectator Control	4	4
1	Amenity Horticulture (Designing Landscapes and Planning their Management)	4	3
1	Amenity Horticulture (Managing Landscape Construction and Maintenance)	4	3
4	Engineering Manufacture and Designing	4	3
4	Engineering Manufacture and Testing	4	3
8	Investigation	4	3
8	Occupational Health and Safety Regulation	4	3
9	Owner Management—Business Management and Development	4	3
10	Periodical Journalism (Subbing)	4	3
11	Training and Development (Design and Delivery)	4	3
5	Laboratory Operations	4	2
7	Catering and Hospitality Management (Housekeeping)	4	2
7	Distribution and Warehousing Operations	4	2
7	Information Systems Analysis	4	2
7	Playwork Development	4	2
8	Criminal Justice Services	4	2
8	Managing Treatment Operations—Clinical or Special Waste	4	2
9	Customer Implementation Support	4	2
9	Insurance (Intermediaries)	4	2
9	Marketing Research	4	2
9	Public Relations	4	2
4	Engineering Manufacture (Designing and Production Planning)	4	1
4	Merchant Vessel Engineering	4	1
6	Fishing Vessel Operations (Unlimited Area)	4	1
6	Merchant Vessel Operations	4	1

Level 4 awards during financial year 1997–98 sorted in descending order

Framework sector	*Title*	*Level*	*Total certificates*
6	Piloting Transport Aircraft	4	1
7	Key Account Management	4	1
7	Kitchen Management	4	1
7	Sport and Recreation (Coaching)	4	1
7	Sport and Recreation Management (Sports Development)	4	1
8	Personnel Management	4	1
8	Special Needs Housing	4	1
9	Computer Network System Selection and Installation Supervision	4	1
9	Network Computer Services Management	4	1
10	Broadcast, Film, and Video Production	4	1
10	Camera Direction	4	1
10	Design	4	1
11	Information and Library Service	4	1
11	Training and Development	4	1
	Total Awards	—	10,140

Level 4 NVQs for which there were no awards recorded financial year 1997–98

Framework sector	*Title*
1	Amenity Horticulture
1	Environmental Conservation (Archaeology)
1	Forestry
3	Building Control
3	Building Services Engineering—Design
3	Building Services Engineering—Service and Maintenance Management
3	Building Services Engineering—Site Management
3	Construction Plant and Equipment Management
3	Highways Maintenance
3	Owner Management, Business Management and Development
3	Property Management
3	Spatial Data Management
3	Traffic Management and Systems Engineering
3	Valuation
4	Engineering Manufacture (Testing and Production Planning)
4	Engineering Surveying of Equipment, Systems and Services
4	Engineering Technology Management
4	Project Control
5	Laboratory Operations (Chemical and Pharmaceutical)
5	Management (Meat Processing)
5	Meat Processing Management (Technical and Production)
6	Controlling Air Terminal Operations
6	Controlling Aircraft Operations
6	Controlling Airport Operations
6	Fishing Vessel Engineering
6	Piloting Rotary Wing Transport Aircraft
7	Accommodation Management
7	Catering and Hospitality Management (Food and Drink Service)
7	Catering and Hospitality Management (Reception)
7	Dairy Retailing
7	Front Office Management
7	Kitchen and Larder Specialist
7	Multi-Skilled Hospitality Management
7	Patisserie and Confectionery Specialist
7	Restaurant Management
7	Retailing
7	Sport and Recreation Management (Facilities)
7	Sports Administration
7	Travel Services (Environmental and Heritage Interpretation)
7	Travel Services (Guiding)
7	Travel Services (Tour Directing)

Level 4 NVQs for which there were no awards recorded financial year 1997–98

Framework sector	*Title*
7	Travel Services (Tour Operations)
8	Community Work
8	Environmental Conservation (Landscape and Ecosystems)
8	Forensic Science
8	Housing
8	Managing Incinerator Operations—Special Waste
8	Managing Landfill Operations—Biodegradable Waste
8	Managing Transfer Operations—Biodegradable Waste
8	Managing Treatment Operations—Biodegradable Waste
8	Providing Fingerprint Services
8	Regulating Waste Management
9	Advertising
9	Banking
9	Building Society Services
9	Building Society Services (Regulated)
9	Central Computer Services Management
9	Developing Union Organisation
9	Direct Marketing
9	Energy Management
9	Information Systems Production Supervision
9	Insurance (General)
9	Insurance (Life Offices)
9	Managing Residential Estate Agency
9	Multi-User Computer System Selection and Installation Supervision
9	Project Management
9	Quality Management
10	Animation Realisation
10	Archive Management
10	Art Direction
10	Book Commissioning
10	Book Contracts
10	Book Design
10	Book Editing
10	Book Editing (Editorial Management)
10	Book Production
10	Book Production and Publicity
10	Book Publishing Publicity and Promotion
10	Book Publishing Rights
10	Book Rights
10	Broadcast Journalism
10	Costume Design and Realisation
10	Delivering Artform Development Programmes
10	Developing and Delivering Cultural Products

Level 4 NVQs for which there were no awards recorded financial year 1997–98

Framework sector	*Title*
10	Editing
10	Graphic Design for the Moving Image
10	Journal Management and Programme Development
10	Lighting Direction
10	Lighting Provision and Co-ordination (Electrical)
10	Make-Up/Hair Design and Realisation
10	Music Performance
10	Newspaper Journalism (Production)
10	Periodical Journalism (Subbing with Layout)
10	Periodical Journalism (Writing Features)
10	Periodical Journalism (Writing News)
10	Periodical Production: Advertisement Production
10	Photography
10	Properties Management
10	Records Management
10	Sound Direction
10	Visual Arts Practice
11	Information and Library Services
11	Museums, Galleries and Heritage (Collection Management and Interpretation)
11	Museums, Galleries and Heritage (Conservation)
11	Training and Development (Flexible and Open Learning)

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage increase he expects in employer contributions to staff training for NVQs between December 1997 and December 1998. [63368]

Mr. Mudie: Many employers offer NVQs entirely at their own expense. We do not gather regular information on employers' expenditure on NVQs.

Class Sizes

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of, and how many primary school pupils were in classes of over (i) 30, (ii) 36 and (iii) 40 in September 1998 in each local education authority and in total; and what was the actual and percentage change in numbers compared with September *(a)* 1996 and *(b)* 1997 in each local education authority and in total. [63500]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information is not collected centrally.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the bids made by local education authorities before 20 November for capital expenditure to meet the Government's class size pledge. [63328]

Ms Estelle Morris: Bids were received from the local education authorities listed below:

Barking and Dagenham
Barnet
Barnsley
Bath and North East Somerset
Bedfordshire
Bexley
Birmingham
Blackburn
Blackpool
Bolton
Bournemouth
Bracknell
Brent
Brighton and Hove
Bristol
Bromley
Buckinghamshire
Bury
Calderdale
Cambridgeshire
Camden
Cheshire
Cornwall
Coventry
Croydon
Cumbria
Darlington
Derby
Derbyshire
Devon
Doncaster
Dorset
Dudley
Durham
Ealing
East Riding of Yorkshire
East Sussex
Enfield
Essex
Gateshead
Gloucestershire
Greenwich
Halton
Hampshire
Hartlepool
Havering
Herefordshire
Hertfordshire
Hillingdon
Hounslow
Isle of Wight
Kingston upon Hull
Kingston upon Thames
Kirklees
Knowsley
Lambeth
Lancashire
Leeds
Leicester City
Leicestershire
Lincolnshire
Liverpool
Luton
Manchester
Medway
Merton
Milton Keynes
Newcastle upon Tyne

Newham
Norfolk
North East Lincolnshire
North Lincolnshire
North Tyneside
North Yorkshire
Northamptonshire
Northumberland
Nottingham City
Nottinghamshire
Oldham
Oxfordshire
Peterborough
Poole
Portsmouth
Reading
Redbridge
Redcar and Cleveland
Rochdale
Rotherham
Salford
Sandwell
Sefton
Sheffield
Shropshire
Slough
Solihull
Somerset
South Gloucestershire
Southampton
Southend on Sea
Southwark
St. Helens
Staffordshire
Stockport
Stockton on Tees
Stoke on Trent
Suffolk
Sunderland
Surrey
Sutton
Tameside
Telford and Wrekin
Thurrock
Torbay
Trafford
Wakefield
Walsall
Waltham Forest
Wandsworth
Warrington
Warwickshire
West Berkshire
West Sussex
Wigan
Wiltshire
Windsor and Maidenhead
Wirral
Wokingham
Wolverhampton
Worcestershire.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many temporary classrooms *(a)* have been built and *(b)* are planned to be built to meet the Government's pledge on class sizes. [63329]

Ms Estelle Morris: We have made clear that where extra classrooms are needed to meet the class size limit, LEAs should provide permanent and not temporary classrooms. Plans will not be approved where these rely simply on the use of temporary accommodation.

Specific Grants

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list for each annual programme of specific grants for education since 1985 *(a)* whether there was a period of consultation before a circular was issued, *(b)* which grants were included, *(c)* for how many grants competitive bidding was required and *(d)* what percentage of the funds were (i) directly available to schools, (ii) allocated through local education authorities and (iii) made available by other routes. [63514]

Ms Estelle Morris: A reply to this question would involve disproportionate cost.

University Teachers

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of university teachers are engaged purely in research and have no teaching responsibilities; and how this percentage compares with *(a)* 1997, *(b)* 1996, *(c)* 1995 and *(d)* 1990. [63366]

Mr. Mudie: The percentage of university academic staff engaged purely in research is shown in the table:

Year	*Percentage*
1990–91	[1]34.4
1994–95	[2]28.3
1995–96	[3]29.5
1996–97	[4]29.6

[1] Based on Universities Statistical Record (USR) data for UK universities formerly funded by Universities Funding Council (UFC)
[2] Based on Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data for UK universities and colleges of higher education
[3] Ibid
[4] Ibid
Note:
Figures for the academic year 1997–98 are not yet available

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he has given universities about the appropriate balance between research and teaching activities. [63367]

Mr. Mudie: In our response to the Dearing Report on Higher Education in February 1998 we said that a better balance is needed in higher education between teaching, research and scholarship. Guidance to the Higher Education Funding Council for England issued on 8 December said that we expect the Council to promote and enhance high quality teaching and learning and welcomed the Council's proposals to set aside £30m for promoting and rewarding high quality in teaching. It also welcomed the Council's involvement in the preparation for an

Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education. The guidance reflects our aim to promote effective learning and teaching, alongside our commitment to maintaining a world class science base.

Free Milk

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on his policy on the provision of free milk in schools. [63897]

Mr. Charles Clarke: If local education authorities and grant-maintained schools choose to provide milk, they must, by law, supply it free to pupils whose parents receive income support or income based job-seekers allowance, but must charge other pupils.

Schools Access Initiative

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he intends to carry out a full audit of how the funding under the Schools Access Initiative has been used throughout England and Wales. [63826]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Matters on expenditure in Wales are for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales. Local education authorities (LEAs) in England are asked each year to return confirmation of their spending in the previous financial year on projects supported through the Schools Access Initiative and to identify individual projects which have been carried out. Expenditure on such projects by LEAs and by grant maintained schools in England is subject to their normal external audit arrangements.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what is the total amount of public subsidy to United Kingdom higher education institutions resulting from means-testing student tuition fees under the Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998; and what is the total amount students and parents are expected to contribute under that Act. [63327]

Mr. Mudie: The estimated public contributions to tuition fees for home and other EU students entering full-time undergraduate courses in 1998–99 in United Kingdom higher education institutions under the new funding arrangements is £184 million. The estimated contribution by students and parents is £163 million, which after allowance for the costs of collection and any default, will be received as income by institutions.

Assisted Places Scheme

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish his current estimate of the revenue savings he expects to accrue as a result of the abolition of the assisted places scheme in the years *(a)* 1998–99, *(b)* 1999–2000, *(c)* 2000–01 and *(d)* 2001–02; and if he will list the assumptions underlying his estimates. [63330]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the right hon. Member for Penrith and The Border (Mr. Maclean) on 2 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *405*.

WALES

Local Government Finance

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has for individual local authority spending in 1999–2000, for council tax damping and arrangements for council tax benefit subsidy. [64153]

Mr. Michael: I am consulting county and country borough councils on their provisional Standard Spending Assessments (SSAs) for 1999–2000 as set out in the following table.

The provisional SSAs have been calculated using the formula agreed with the Welsh Local Government Association. They are consistent with my proposal for total standard spending, net of specific grants, of £2,986 million which I announced in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) on 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *229–30*. The breakdown of total standard spending, net of specific grants, is:

	£ million
Provisional SSAs for county and county borough councils	2,806.3
Provisional SSAs for police authorities[1]	178.3
Proposed payments to bodies specified under section 76 of the Local Government Finance Act 1988	1.8
Total standard spending net of specific grants	2,986.4

[1] Announced in my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) on 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *212*.

The details of the council tax damping scheme which I announced on 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *229–30*, are as follows:

I proposed to provide council tax reduction grant of £22.5 million to 8 councils;

the grant will keep council tax increases, excluding community council precepts and discretionary non-domestic rate relief, to £70 at Band D in those councils' areas, or the parts of them that qualify for damping, as long as councils do not increase their budgets above the guideline figures that I am announcing for limiting council tax benefit subsidy payments.

The provisional damping grant entitlement for each council is shown in the following table.

I propose that the amount of revenue support grant (RSG) for 1999–2000 should be £1,891.5 million.

The arrangements for council tax benefit subsidy are as follows:

I propose to set guideline figures consistent with an average increase of 7.2 per cent. in council tax which, in broad terms, equates to a budget increase of 5.9 per cent. over this year for each council, subject to allowing each council to spend the increase in its SSA in full;

on council tax above the guideline figure, subsidy would be withdrawn at the rate of 50 per cent.

I have made one minor change to the figures that I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire (Ms Lawrence) in my answer on 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *229–30*. I now propose that the amount of specific grants for 1999–2000 should be £258 million.

Consequently, my proposals for total standard spending and aggregate external finance are £3,244 million and £2,828 million respectively.

My Department has written today to the Welsh Local Government Association and all local authorities in Wales to initiate a consultation on my proposals. Copies of the consultation letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

£ million

Council	*Provisional SSA for 1999–2000*	*Provisional entitlement to damping grant*	*Provisional guideline figure*
Isle of Anglesey	68.0	—	70.2
Gwynedd	118.9	—	126.8
Conwy	104.7	—	104.7
Denbighshire	91.8	—	97.1
Flintshire	134.9	—	140.7
Wrexham	112.7	—	118.4
Powys	131.4	—	134.1
Ceredigion	70.2	0.2	75.8
Pembrokeshire	114.5	—	116.9
Carmarthenshire	169.1	—	177.9
Swansea	214.2	0.6	226.7
Neath Port Talbot	133.5	3.2	148.4
Bridgend	123.6	0.0	131.0
The Vale of Glamorgan	110.1	—	112.0
Rhondda, Cynon, Taff	230.6	8.9	254.1
Merthyr Tydfil	59.0	3.9	67.1
Caerphilly	164.2	0.1	172.8
Blaenau Gwent	70.4	5.6	79.4
Torfaen	89.8	—	92.1
Monmouthshire	75.5	—	75.4
Newport	130.8	—	134.2
Cardiff	288.1	—	299.3
All county and county borough councils: total	2,806.3	22.5	not applicable

Budget Statistics

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has for allocating the Welsh budget provision in 1999–2000, and provisionally for the years *(a)* 2000–01 and *(b)* 2001–02; and if he will make a statement. [64154]

Mr. Michael: The Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) settlement announced on 14 July 1998, *Official Report,* columns 187–194, allocated a total Welsh budget of £7,812 million, £8,223 million and £8,666 million for 1999–2000, 2000–01 and 2001–02 respectively. This provides for an average annual increase of 5.3 per cent. over the three years. I have now reached my decisions on how the budget should be allocated. In reaching these decisions, I took into account the views we received on the CSR consultation paper issued in September, and I would like to thank those who responded to the paper.

I have decided to allocate significant additional resources to health and education to deliver our Manifesto commitments on class sizes, education standards and health waiting lists. These are our priorities because they are the people's priorities. There are also real terms increases for key issues like tackling social exclusion, improving the economic prosperity of Wales and for other important programmes. The allocations will provide an excellent start to the National Assembly for Wales.

For the NHS, I have allocated the indicative cash sums announced at the time of the CSR settlement in July—an extra £1.030 billion over the next three years. This is an average increase of 6.4 per cent. (3.9 per cent. in real terms) each year. As well as enabling us to meet our manifesto commitments on reducing waiting lists, these allocations will also secure other important service improvements.

For Education and Training, I am allocating more than the indicative figures announced at the time of the CSR. I am increasing the education and training budgets by £844 million over the three years, an extra £1,000 per pupil/student in Wales. This is an average annual increase of 7 per cent. (4.5 per cent. real) over the next three years. The increase fulfils our manifesto pledges to make education our first priority. Over £70 million of the local government revenue settlement will be for education and we will expect local authorities to increase education spending by at least this amount. The increase in resources will fund an additional 28,000 students in Further Education, and an extra 8,000 students in Higher Education, by 2001–02.

I have already announced, at column *390,* the provisional settlement for local government and the police. The settlement allows for an extra £868 million in extra spending on services by Welsh local authorities over the next 3 years, net of specific grants. In addition, Welsh councils will be able to invest some £1.2 billion in capital projects over the next 3 years.

We have set ambitious targets for improving the economic prosperity of Wales in 'Pathway to Prosperity'. I have increased provision for economic measures by £134 million over the period. The new Welsh Development Agency will have a gross programme of over £200 million in 1999–2000. We are also increasing our support for small businesses. I am allocating an extra £1 million each year to the Wales Tourist Board to help promote tourism activities associated with the Rugby World Cup and Millennium promotions. On transport, we will begin to address the priorities on roads set out in 'Driving Wales Forward'. We will also be announcing substantially increased support for local authorities' Integrated Transport Packages.

I am also setting up a special fund which will enable the Assembly to continue to improve Wales's economic prosperity.

Social inclusion and tackling poverty is another of the Government's priorities and I am allocating an extra £87 million over the period to help regenerate the poorest communities and to help the most vulnerable members of society. I am allocating provision of £25 million for Sure Start to begin a major programme to improve the life chances of very young children, especially the children of families living in the more disadvantaged areas. We will be encouraging measures to promote access to education and 'second chance' opportunities for training. I also want to encourage joint working across a number of

programmes and organisations and I am setting aside funds for the Assembly to decide how it wishes to pursue these objectives.

I have already announced resources to ensure that the new Tir Gofal agri-environmental scheme will be properly funded, thereby meeting another of our Manifesto Commitments. We are also putting extra money into the Welsh Food Strategy.

Arts and sport in Wales is an area where provision in recent years has been cut in real terms. These programmes add to the economic and social well being of our community and I have allocated additional resources in each of the next 3 years to provide real growth.

Finally, I have allocated additional resources to meet the cost of the Assembly. This includes the capital cost of the Assembly buildings and in the first year the cost of the Assembly elections.

In addition to the CSR settlement, the Welsh budget will receive at least an extra £75 million during 2000–01 and 2001–02 from the Government's Capital Modernisation Fund; these moneys will be used to fund innovative capital projects, such as housing initiatives, schools and hospitals. The allocations to the main programmes are set out in the following tables.

It is my intention to discuss the details of the allocations at a sitting of the Welsh Grand Committee on 16 December.

1999–2002 Welsh Office spending plans

	Spending plans (£ million)						
Programme	*1998–99 plans (£ million)*	*1999–2000*	*2000–01*	*2001–02*	*Total change (£ million)*	*Average annual change (%)*	*Average annual real terms change (%)*
NHS	2,480	2,655	2,825	2,990	1,030	6.4	3.9
Education and Training[1]	1,875	2,008	2,162	2,299	844	7.0	4.5
Local Authority Revenue[2]	2,842	2,986	3,128	3,279	868	4.9	2.4
Local Authority Capital[3]	426	405	395	406	–71	–1.5	–4.0
Economic Prosperity[4]	319	335	368	388	134	6.7	4.2
Cardiff Bay Development Corporation—to be wound up by 31 March 2000	45	35	—	—	—	—	—
Social Inclusion[5]	90	109	114	134	87	14.4	12.0
Agriculture and Environment[6]	77	83	85	88	25	4.6	2.1
Arts and Culture	45	47	51	52	15	5.0	2.5
Central Administration incl. Assembly	94	120	124	126	88	10.9	8.4
Office of Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools[7]	10	8	9	9	–4	–4.0	–6.5
Other non-block and demand-led items[8]	405	390	399	423	–4	1.5	–1.0
Total budget[9,10]	7,412	7,812	8,223	8,666	2,465	5.3	2.8

[1] Education and Training line includes Central Government Education and Training programmes and Local Authority revenue and capital expenditure.
[2] Local Authority revenue line includes total standard spending net of specific grants, police grants and transfers from other Government Departments.
[3] Local Authority capital line includes the Windfall Tax resources for education which are outside of the published Welsh Budget figures.
[4] Economic Prosperity line includes Central Government provision for Economic and Industrial Development programmes, Roads and Transport.
[5] Social Inclusion lines includes Central Government provision for Housing and Personal Social Services.
[6] Agriculture and Environment line includes Central Government provision for Domestic Agriculture and the Environment.
[7] OHMCI includes running costs and programme expenditure.
[8] Other non-block and demand-led items includes Housing Revenue Account Subsidy, Common Agricultural Policy grants and European Regional Development Fund grants.
[9] Total Budget line is not the sum of the individual lines since the local authority education figures are included in Education and Training and the local authority revenue and capital lines along with other technical adjustments.
[10] In addition to these figures, the Welsh Budget will be increased by its share of the Capital Modernisation fund—£30 million in 2000–01 and £45 million in 2001–02.

Welsh Office spending plans—main allocations: 1999–2002

	£ million					
Programme	*1998–99 plans*	*1999–2000 plans*	*2000–01 plans*	*2001–02 plans*	*Total change*	*Average annual change (%)*
National Health Service	2,480.0	2,655.0	2,825.0	2,999.0	1,030.0	6.4
Education and Training	1,875.0	2,008.0	2,162.0	2,299.0	844.0	7.0
Of which:						
Local Authority (Revenue and Capital)	1,315.0	1,390.0	1,466.0	1,562.0	473.0	5.9
Further Education Funding Council for Wales[1]	178.6	199.6	213.6	228.6	106.0	8.6
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales[2]	232.3	270.5	294.3	314.9	182.8	10.7
Training and Enterprise	125.5	141.4	149.7	150.8	65.5	6.4
Local Authority Settlement						
Total Standard Spending[3]	2,841.8	2,986.4	3,128.0	3,279.0	868.0	4.9
Capital	425.7	404.6	395.1	406.0	–71.4	–1.5

Welsh Office spending plans—main allocations: 1999–2002

£ million

Programme	*1998–99 plans*	*1999–2000 plans*	*2000–01 plans*	*2001–02 plans*	*Total change*	*Average annual change (%)*
Economic Prosperity	319.0	335.0	368.0	388.0	134.0	6.7
Of which:						
Regional Selective Assistance	61.2	63.2	61.2	61.2	2.0	0.0
Welsh Development Agency	123.0	130.0	130.0	130.0	21.0	1.9
Wales Tourist Board	14.4	15.4	15.4	15.4	3.0	2.3
Central Government Roads and Transport	102.4	104.4	107.4	107.4	12.0	1.6
Economic Development and Business Support[4]	9.0	9.0	42.0	62.0	86.0	138.1
Cardiff Bay Development Corporation[5]	44.9	35.4	—	—	—	—
Social Inclusion	90.0	109.0	114.0	134.0	87.0	14.4
Of which:						
Personal Social Services	6.0	12.0	20.0	20.0	34.0	55.6
Central Government Housing	84.0	89.0	84.0	84.0	5.0	0.1
Social Inclusion Fund	0.0	8.0	10.0	30.0	48.0	—
Agriculture and Environment	77.0	83.0	85.0	88.0	25.0	4.6
Of which:						
Domestic Agriculture	54.0	57.4	59.0	62.0	16.4	4.7
Countryside Council for Wales	23.7	23.7	23.7	23.7	0.0	0.0
Cadw (incl. Royal Commission on Ancient and Historic Monuments)	7.6	7.7	7.7	7.7	0.3	0.4
Arts and Culture	45.0	47.0	51.0	52.0	15.0	5.0
Of which:						
Welsh Language Board	5.8	5.9	6.1	6.3	0.9	2.8
Arts Council of Wales	14.3	14.8	15.3	15.6	2.8	2.9
National Library for Wales	6.0	6.2	6.4	6.5	1.1	2.7
National Museums and Galleries of Wales	12.3	13.3	13.7	14.0	4.1	4.4
Sports Council for Wales	6.6	6.8	7.0	7.2	1.2	2.9
Memo item: total Welsh budget	7,411.9	7,812.1	8,223.4	8,665.5	2,465.3	5.3

[1] Excludes provision for student access funds.
[2] Includes transfer from DfEE resulting from the Dearing Review.
[3] Figure is net of specific grants, police grant and transfers from other Government Departments.
[4] Includes Economic Prosperity Fund.
[5] CBDC is to be wound up by 31 March 2000.

Bus and Rail Industries

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what estimate he has made of the number of people employed in *(a)* the bus industry and *(b)* the rail industry in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [62911]

Mr. Hain: The only available information relates to the bus and coach industry where the number of staff employed in Wales is provisionally estimated at 7,200 in 1997–98.

NHS Trusts

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he proposes to announce the names of the chairmen of the NHS trusts in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [62695]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: My right hon. Friend announced the chairs and some non-executive directors of the new NHS trusts in Wales on Tuesday 8 December.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he expects the Community Support Framework, associated with Wales's bid for Objective I funding for the Western Wales and Valleys NUT2 area, to be completed; and what progress has been made in preparatory work for the Framework. [63151]

Mr. Hain: The draft regulations for Structural Funds would, if agreed by the Council, require the completion of a CSF within 9 months of the adoption of the Regulations. Negotiation of the Regulations is expected to be completed by the end of March 1999.

The Wales European Task Force is currently working on the identification of strategic priorities for the programme. I expect this preliminary stage of their work to be completed in January. The proposed strategic priorities will then be the subject of wider public consultation before Easter next year.

Dentists

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what has been the range of the capital grant made by the Welsh Office to support salaried National Health Service dentists in Wales since the introduction of the scheme; and what repayment provisions apply if the dentists subsequently leave the NHS. [63148]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Capital funding of around £220,000 was paid to the Family Health Services Authorities of Gwynedd and Dyfed over the financial

years 1993–94, 1994–95 and 1995–96 to meet the costs incurred by those Authorities in refurbishing and equipping surgery premises to a clinical standard suitable for use by dentists employed by those Authorities. No repayment provisions apply. For the most part, the investment was in premises also used for the provision of Community Dental services and I understand that they are still in NHS use.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many salaried dentists have been employed in Wales since the Welsh Office set up its emergency scheme to maintain the availability of the NHS dental service; and of these how many *(a)* are currently working within the NHS dental service, *(b)* have transferred to provide a private dental service and *(c)* have ceased to provide a dental service in Wales. [63157]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The number of salaried dentist posts established by Family Health Services Authorities in Wales, and successor Health Authorities, has varied during the period since the first post was filled in 1993. The maximum in post at any one time was 7, in 1996, but there are none at present. Information on the whereabouts of the dentists who were formerly employed by the Authorities is not held centrally.

The Welsh Office dental initiative has been an outstanding success in attracting new dentists to those parts of Wales where they are needed most. The grant scheme offers a better and more economic long term alternative to the salaried option in addressing inadequacies in service provision.

Food Poisoning

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales (1) if he will publish a monthly breakdown of the outbreaks of food poisoning in each of the last five years; [63332]

(2) how many outbreaks of food poisoning there were in each county in each of the last five years. [63517]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Preliminary monthly data on reported food poisoning in the health authorities of England and Wales are published during the second week of each month in the weekly publication, Communicable Disease Report (CDR).

Final quarterly, regional data on food poisoning which are more complete are also published in CDR (March, June, September and December 1998). Quarterly data are available from 1996. Prior to this, data on salmonella were published in the PHLS State Veterinary Service (SVS) Update.

Copies of the reports are available in the House of Commons Library or can be downloaded from the PHLS website, address: http://www.phls.co.uk.

Mixed-sex Hospital Wards

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many mental health hospitals or psychiatric units in Wales have mixed-sex wards; and if he will list them. [63786]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: Information about mixed sex wards in mental health hospitals or psychiatric units is not held centrally.

Schools Access Initiative

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the use of funding by Welsh schools under the Schools Access Initiative. [63827]

Mr. Hain: Returns from local authorities relating to the Schools Access Initiative indicate that funding was used for a variety of measures including ramps, alterations to doorways, toilets with access for disabled, extra sinks and shower facilities, white lines on steps and stairs and lift installations.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what records his Department has kept of the use of the £500,000 per year granted to Welsh schools under the Schools Access Initiative. [63829]

Mr. Hain: Local authorities were asked to provide reports detailing what measures had been implemented under the Initiative. 9 local authorities reported in 1997.

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he intends to audit the use of the £500,000 per year granted to Welsh schools under the Schools Access Initiative. [63828]

Mr. Hain: Local authority expenditure is subject to audit by Audit Commission appointed auditors. No separate arrangements are made for reporting to the Welsh Office.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Arms Exports

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has carried out to establish in how many and what percentage of cases military equipment exported since 1 May 1997 under an export licence has been used for *(a)* internal repression and *(b)* other human rights abuses; and if he will make a statement. [62424]

Mr. Tony Lloyd *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* No formal mechanisms exist at present for systematically monitoring the use that has been made of British defence equipment once it has been exported. Where relevant, our Posts overseas report on the use of British-supplied equipment in the light of information they receive. We have no evidence that military equipment exported under a UK licence since 1 May 1997 has been used for internal repression or other human rights abuses.

Licence applications for exports of military equipment and dual-use goods to military or internal security end-users are assessed against our defence export criteria and the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. Under Criterion Two of the EU Code we assess the attitude of the recipient country of the proposed export to relevant principles established by international human rights instruments, and exercise special caution and vigilance in issuing licences to countries where serious violations of human rights have been established by the competent bodies of the UN, the Council of Europe or by the EU. We will not issue an export licence if there is a clearly identifiable risk that the proposed export might be used for internal repression.

Indonesia

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received on deaths and injuries in demonstrations in Indonesia on 13 and 14 November. [63449]

Mr. Fatchett: We have received reports of at least 14 deaths of civilians and members of the security forces as a result of violence in Jakarta on 13 and 14 November. A large number of injuries have also been reported.

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received of British military equipment being used against demonstrators in Indonesia on 13 and 14 November; and if he will list the equipment involved. [63448]

Mr. Fatchett: We have received reports that some of the military equipment deployed by the Indonesian armed forces during the civil unrest in Indonesia on 13 and 14 November was UK-supplied. We have had no reports that equipment licensed since 1 May 1997 was used.

UK Overseas Territories

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when he expects to publish his White Paper on United Kingdom Overseas Territories. [63488]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We plan that the Paper will be published early in the new year.

General Affairs Council

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what was the outcome of the General Affairs Council held in Brussels on 7 and 8 December; and if he will make a statement. [63341]

Ms Quin: The General Affairs Council in Brussels on 7/8 December adopted the A points listed in document 13773/98 and noted the resolutions, decisions and opinions adopted by the European Parliament in its sessions of 4–5 November and 16–20 November listed in documents 11765/98 and 12776/98. Copies of the documents listing the A points and resolutions will be placed in the House Libraries as soon as they become available.

Foreign Ministers met in a Conclave on 6 December to discuss all areas of Agenda 2000 on the basis of a draft Presidency Report to Vienna, with particular emphasis on Structural Funds. We believe the report was a good summary of progress so far. It was agreed that it should go to the Vienna European Council. There was further discussion at the GAC on 7 December, but no formal conclusions.

The GAC agreed its report to the Vienna European Council broadly endorsing the Commission's Progress Reports. It also agreed Conclusions stating that it would not at this stage make any recommendations to the European Council to add extra countries to the accession negotiations.

The Presidency presented a factual paper, detailing work needed to implement the Treaty of Amsterdam. The GAC welcomed progress so far, and called for a precise working timetable for the forthcoming months, so that the Council can regularly review preparations.

The Council agreed a short report to the European Council on Common Strategies, the new foreign policy instrument to be introduced by the Amsterdam Treaty. It also recommended a short list of subjects for Common Strategies, for the European Council to consider.

The GAC agreed on a progress report for the Vienna European Council on developing a comprehensive EU policy towards Russia. They looked forward to receiving a proposal from the Commission on EU food aid for Russia. They underlined the importance of adequate control mechanisms for the delivery of aid. Ministers will review the implementation of food aid at future meetings.

The EU Declaration on 10 December reaffirms our commitment to speak up for the rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Human rights is high on Britain's foreign policy agenda. And the initiative my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has taken with Joschka Fischer—to publish an Annual EU Human Rights Report—has helped ensure that human rights is firmly on Europe's foreign policy agenda as well.

The GAC also had an informal orientation discussion on European defence, where partners welcomed my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister's initiative at the Poertschach informal European Council, and the joint statement on principles agreed between my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and President Chirac and Prime Minister Jospin at St. Malo.

The Council agreed to establish a task force on asylum and immigration. The task force will submit an initial report to the GAC by March 1999, and a further report on the results of its work before the Tampere Special European Council in October 1999. Coreper, in consultation with the K4 Committee, will consider precise terms of reference and submit them for Council approval by January 1999.

The Presidency presented two papers, on subsidiarity, and Council Working Methods. The subsidiarity paper is based on ideas raised at Poertschach, for example early application of the Amsterdam Treaty's subsidiarity proposal, and wider dissemination of the Commission's annual subsidiarity report. The Council Working Methods paper contains suggestions for improving efficiency, for example merging some Councils, better use of written procedures, restructuring agendas. Both papers were approved for transmission to the European Council.

The GAC welcomed the considerable progress made in the negotiations towards a bilateral EU/Switzerland agreement. They agreed Coreper should examine the Commission's proposal to resolve any outstanding concerns. The Presidency hoped it might be possible to reach political agreement by the Vienna European Council.

The GAC made a declaration calling on both sides in the Middle East Peace Progress to continue the implementation of the Wye Agreement in the face of violence and mutual recrimination which threaten the progress already made.

The Council adopted conclusions on Kosovo which called on both sides to respect the various relevant UN Security Council Resolutions, to refrain from violence, and engage actively in the negotiating process. The Council instructed officials to address the problem of reconstruction, calling for a report in time for the January

GAC. It condemned the FRY authorities' repression of the independent media, and agreed to impose a visa ban on the personalities responsible. It also instructed officials to consider ways to support the EU forensic mission to Kosovo.

The Council expressed its support for the reform process in Montenegro, and asked officials to consider the possibilities for further assistance.

The Council urged Croatia to intensify work to assist refugee return, media freedom and election law reform. On Bosnia and Herzegovina, it looked forward to the Madrid Peace Implementation Council; and welcomed the arrest by SFOR of General Krstic and his transfer to The Hague. It welcomed the formation of a new Government in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

On Albania the Council welcomed the peaceful course and outcome of the referendum on the constitution, which will be a fundamental element in the construction of a stable democracy. It deplored the boycott of the referendum and continued boycott of parliament by the Democratic Party and tasked the Council's competent bodies to recommend an adequate EU response.

Commissioner Pinheiro reported on the latest round of talks of a Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the UK and South Africa. He had met with trade minister Erwin on 1 December. The Council had an exchange of views on the outstanding issues and agreed to review the situation at their next meeting.

Council agreed a revision of the Community's Generalised System of Preferences scheme. The review combines into one Regulation previously separate schemes covering agricultural and industrial products. The revision will enter into legal effect on January; its provisions will come into force on 1 July. We have argued strongly in favour of the changes.

Sir Leon Brittan gave an update on recent developments on the bananas discussion with the US. The Commission would continue to look for ways to solve the current impasse. The Member States took note with approval.

The Council noted with concern attacks on Christians during recent rioting in Indonesia, on which the Presidency had made a statement on 23 November. EU Heads of Mission in Jakarta had been asked to underline this concern with the Indonesian Government.

In the margins of the Council, the EU Troika held a political dialogue meeting on 8 December with the Prime Minister and Foreign Minister of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. This was an opportunity for the new Government to describe the internal political situation, and for both sides to discuss bilateral relations, and the situation in Kosovo.

Sudan

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received about the murder of three aid workers in the Nuba mountains in June; and if he will place them in the Library. [63447]

Mr. Fatchett: The UN have given oral reports about the incident to our Embassy in Khartoum. On 9 June 1998 a World Food Programme (WFP) convoy and its police escort was attacked in the Nuba mountains, territory held by the Government of Sudan. Three Sudanese personnel were killed, two from WFP and one from the Sudanese Red Crescent (SRC), and three more SRC personnel injured. The incident occurred about 60 kms north east of Kadugli between the villages of Arie and Hadab. The convoy was fired on when crossing a Wadi; the WFP Landcruiser seems to have borne the brunt of the assault.

We have not received any formal written reports which could be placed in the Library.

Chechnya

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library the advice given to Granger Telecom, Surrey in respect of the safety of British nationals working in Chechnya. [63627]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The advice given to Granger Telecom was consistent over time and widely available. At the first FCO contact with Granger personnel in July of this year Granger's attention was drawn to the FCO's travel advice. This information was again shared with Granger at a meeting in August. The advice included the following:

"We strongly advise against travel to the Chechen Republic ... because of the unstable security situation. Visitors have been kidnapped in these areas recently."

A copy of the travel advice of 18 August has been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Diplomatic Posts

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what dates the diplomatic posts will be closed in *(a)* Chaing Mai *(b)* Cleveland, *(c)* Kuching, *(d)* Pusan and *(e)* Seville. [63824]

Mr. Fatchett: Kuching was closed on 28 November 1998.

No date has been set for the closure of Chiang Mai, Cleveland, Pusan and Seville. They will take piace towards the end of this financial year, or in financial year 1999–2000.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has received from *(a)* Governments, *(b)* industry and *(c)* other interested parties on the proposed closures of the diplomatic posts at *(a)* Chaing Mai, *(b)* Cleveland, *(c)* Kuching, *(d)* Pusan and *(e)* Seville; and what consultation he has undertaken in each case. [63825]

Mr. Fatchett: There has been no representation received in either the host countries or in London from governments or any other party over the proposed closures of Kuching, Pusan and Chiang Mai. DTI have received inquiries about these closures from British companies asking for clarification.

The issue of the closure of Seville was raised informally with our Ambassador in Spain by the Spanish Government, and we have received some representations from members of the public concerned that there would be sufficient consular cover from Malaga.

Thirteen Congressmen, a Senator and the Governor of Ohio have petitioned our Embassy in Washington over the closure of Cleveland. There have been representations to the FCO and our embassy in Washington from some US politicians and by various British companies and members of the public.

In each case, we took representations into consideration before taking a final decision.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list *(a)* the selling agents, *(b)* the sale price and *(c)* the reserve price of each of his Department's properties currently for sale in (i) Dublin, (ii) Bonn and (iii) Casablanca. [63819]

Mr. Fatchett: The Selling Agents in Dublin are Hamilton Osborne King and F.P.D. Savills. In Bonn we are being advised by Colliers Erdman Lewis, although they are not appointed in the capacity of agents. In Casablanca our agents are Gerald Cantarel.

The remainder of the information requested is commercially sensitive.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to close the High Commission in Port Vila in Vanuatu. [63822]

Mr. Fatchett: There are no plans to close the High Commission in Port Vila, Vanuatu. However we are looking at a more flexible approach to our representation there.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to reduce the British diplomatic presence in Papua New Guinea. [63820]

Mr. Fatchett: Of the three UK-based staff currently in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, one will not be replaced when his tour ends (March 1999). The remaining two positions will be retained.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs how many *(a)* departmental officials, *(b)* locally-engaged staff and *(c)* officials from other departments are currently engaged in the diplomatic posts in (i) Chaing Mai, (ii) Cleveland, (iii) Kuching, (iv) Pusan and (v) Seville. [63823]

Mr. Fatchett: The following table shows the number of staff employed in the Missions listed.

Post staff	*UK-based FCO staff*	*LE staff*	*Other department staff*
Chiang Mai	1.0	1.0	0.0
Cleveland	1.0	4.5	0.0
Kuching	1.0	1.0	0.0
Pusan	0.0	2.0	0.0
Seville	0.0	5.0	0.0
Total	3.0	13.5	0.0

North Korea

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of whether North Korea is meeting its obligations under the non-proliferation agreement. [63816]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: North Korea's Framework Agreement with the US commits it to freezing its Nuclear Reactor programme, and to allowing IAEA to inspect its nuclear waste sites. But we remain concerned that the IAEA is still not receiving full co-operation from North Korea. North Korea's decision in October to allow the IAEA to restart canning operations at a frozen reactor was a positive step. But it is essential that North Korea implements the IAEA Safeguards Agreement at the earliest possible opportunity, in order to give the international community confidence that it is complying in full.

We have consistently supported the IAEA in its dealings with North Korea, and supported a strongly worded resolution on this issue at IAEA General Conference in October.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has held over the past two months with Madeline Albright on North Korea's nuclear programme; and if he will make a statement. [63817]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has had no substantive discussions with Madeline Albright on North Korea's nuclear programme over the past two months.

Nuclear issues were raised at the EU Troika meeting on 2 December, and at bilateral talks with North Korea on 3 December.

Coptic Christians

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Egyptian Government concerning the persecution of Coptic Christians in Egypt. [63815]

Mr. Fatchett: The British Embassy in Cairo closely follow human rights issues, including those related to freedom of religion. They assess that there is no general Egyptian Government policy of discrimination against Christians—a view shared by many leading Copts in Egypt who do not encourage diplomatic intervention in their problems.

We will continue to stay in touch with the Coptic Church and to monitor the situation.

Lockerbie

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the discussions held between Colonel Gadaffi and Kofi Annan about Lockerbie. [63818]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: We remain in close touch with the United Nations Secretary-General, and are grateful for his efforts to persuade Libya to comply with UNSCR 1192. We look to Libya to provide an early and positive response.

China (Human Rights)

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Chinese authorities concerning individuals imprisoned for counter-revolutionary offences. [63537]

Mr. Fatchett: Through our continuing bilateral and EU/China human rights dialogues we have raised the cases of a number of individuals detained for counter-revolutionary offences. We have encouraged China to review all such cases following the removal of crimes of counter-revolution from China's Criminal Law in 1997.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Chinese authorities on their implementation of the United Nations Convention on Human Rights. [63538]

Mr. Fatchett: Through our continuing bilateral and EU/China human rights dialogues, we are encouraging China to ratify quickly, with as few reservations as possible, the two international human rights covenants which it has signed. UK experts visited China in February to share experience in this area.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the detention of members of the Democratic Party of China. [63539]

Mr. Fatchett: We are dismayed at the recent detention of members of the China Democratic Party. The actions of the Chinese authorities are at odds with the principles of the international human rights covenants which China has signed. China should release all of those detained and take a more tolerant attitude to those who wish to express freely their political views.

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations he has made to the Chinese authorities concerning the detention of *(a)* Xu Wenli, *(b)* Lu Decheng, *(c)* Yu Dongyue and *(d)* Yu Zhijan. [63540]

Mr. Fatchett: We are dismayed at the recent detention of members of the China Democratic Party. On 2 December, our Embassy in Beijing expressed our concerns to the Chinese government. They can be in no doubt as to our views.

Vietnam

Dr. Ladyman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement about recent achievements of British business in Vietnam. [64090]

Mr. Fatchett: UK business has indeed achieved a series of important successes in Vietnam. UK investment in the country has risen by 50 per cent. in 1998. Foster Wheeler Energy Ltd. have recently won an important contract, worth some $15 million, as front-end engineering design consultants for the planned $1.5 billion Dung Quat oil refinery in Vietnam. The award of this contract against stiff competition is a major success. We expect Foster Wheeler's involvement to lead to substantial further business—worth perhaps several hundred million pounds—in the refinery for UK suppliers. The firm has also secured a $2 million contract to run and maintain PetroVietnam Gas Corporation's operations in Vung Tau.

Cable & Wireless received a $207 million investment licence in August to install 250,000 telephone lines in Hanoi, during the visit of my hon. Friend the Minister for Trade. Negotiations took four years. Earlier this year, Mitsui Babcock won the largest ever UK export order to Vietnam to supply power station boilers worth $123 million; and Tate & Lyle has invested $85 million in a sugar refining plant.

These successes follow several years of persistent efforts in support of would-be British investors in Vietnam not only by the companies themselves, but also by our diplomatic posts in Vietnam, by visiting UK Ministers, and by DTI and FCO officials. Those efforts continue in support of other major potential business which could result in significant spin-off benefits for many British equipment and service providers and further enhance the commercial relationship between the UK and Vietnam.

George Atkinson

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what response he has received from the Government of Dubai consequent upon his note verbale regarding the arbitrary detention of George Atkinson; and if he will make a statement. [63415]

Mr. Fatchett: We have not yet received a substantive reply. On 8 December my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs had a meeting with the UAE Ambassador during which she raised the question of the United Nations Working Group on Arbitrary Detention's decision. My noble Friend asked that in the light of the UN Working Group's decision Mr. Atkinson be released. The Ambassador undertook to refer to his Government.

On 10 December the Government of the UAE told our Consul-General in Dubai that the Note is under consideration.

On 13 December, Mr. Atkinson was found guilty and sentenced to two terms of 3 years imprisonment plus fines. We understand he will appeal immediately.

Cuba (Spanish Royal Visit)

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions he has had with his Spanish counterpart on King Juan Carlos's proposed visit to Cuba. [63699]

Ms Quin: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has not discussed the King of Spain's proposed visit to Cuba with Sr. Matutes, the Spanish Foreign Minister.

Chile (British Ambassador)

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs when the British Ambassador to Chile moved into the Hyatt hotel in Santiago; for what reason; how long she intends to stay there; and what are the additional costs to public funds. [63700]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: HM Ambassador to Chile has not moved into the Hyatt hotel.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Tritium (Severn Estuary)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action his Department proposes

to take to reduce the levels of tritium found in sole, flounder and mussels in the Severn Estuary; and if he will make a statement. [62964]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I have been asked to reply.

In 1999, Nycomed Amersham will be applying for a new discharge authorisation from the Environment Agency. It will be for the Agency to determine the level of discharge of tritium that would be appropriate. The Secretary of State will be a statutory consultee reflecting his responsibilities for food safety.

In terms of dose to the critical group of fishermen, and fish and shellfish consumers, it is estimated that the current tritium concentrations in fish and shellfish contribute 40–45 microsieverts per year. Together with the dose from carbon-14 the total dose to the critical group is 60 microsieverts per year. This is well below the established limit of 1,000 microsieverts per year, and the dose constraint of 300 microsieverts per year from new sources.

Meat Exports (Specified Risk Material)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what action was taken against those companies which attempted to export meat or meat products which failed to comply with national legislation concerning specified risk material during the first quarter of 1998. [63142]

Mr. Rooker: The Meat Hygiene Service, an Agency of MAFF, enforces the SRM controls on a day to day basis in licensed slaughterhouses and cutting plants. In all other premises approved under the SRM legislation, the controls are enforced by local authorities. In addition, the State Veterinary Service carries out regular unannounced independent audit visits to all premises approved under the legislation to monitor the extent of compliance. The inspection figures for the 12 month period to the end of October 1998 show that 4,096 visits were made to abattoirs in Great Britain. At 4,074 of these visits (99.5 per cent.), the handling and disposal of SRM were found to be fully satisfactory. No cases have been found of bovine spinal cord not being fully removed from carcases in licensed slaughterhouses in Great Britain since March 1996.

We are not aware of any attempts to export meat or meat products from which SRM has not been removed in accordance with the controls.

Farm Incomes

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to reverse the decline in farm incomes. [63125]

Mr. Rooker: Government and all those associated with food production in the UK need to work together towards a sustainable, competitive and profitable industry and an attractive and viable countryside for the future. This means in particular securing reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, and I am planning a broad consultation with all parts of the industry on the way forward on this.

Food (EU Inspection Agencies)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will list those agencies which are licensed to inspect food production establishments in third countries on behalf of the EC; [63138]

(2) how regular are the inspections of plants in each EU country and outside the EU by the Office of Veterinary and Phytosanitary Inspection; [63143]

(3) if he will make it his policy to request information from the European Commission regarding the dates when each establishment producing meat in third countries which export to the UK was last inspected by or for the EU. [63141]

Mr. Rooker: The European Commission's Food and Veterinary Office (FVO) carry out a number of missions each year to look at member states' and third countries' procedures and establishments. These missions involve audits of the bodies responsible for consumer health protection and include inspections of some individual processing premises. In addition, some member states who traditionally have carried out their own audits of third countries' procedures and establishments may continue to do so, either for products for which import rules are not yet harmonised across the Community or to complement the Commission's programme. MAFF staff are hoping to visit Brazil and Thailand early in the near year to carry out audits of the public health controls on poultry meat and poultry meat products.

The Commission are in the process of expanding the FVO so that it can carry out inspections in all third countries to verify that their establishments comply with Community provisions. As an interim measure, it has been agreed by the Council of Ministers that, for products of animal origin other than fresh meat, guarantees of conformity with Community provisions for the protection of public and animal health may, until 1 January 2001, be given by the competent authority of the third country concerned.

The frequency of FVO missions to individual countries is not laid down but is based on priorities. Work programmes are discussed in advance with the member states and reflect past experience of the products and countries concerned and the importance of the trade. Reports of the missions are, as a matter of course, presented to the Standing Veterinary Committee and summaries placed on the DG XXIV internet site.

Meat Hygiene Charges (EU)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) if he will list the EU countries which apply the discretionary standard charge abatement provided for in Council Directive 85/73/EEC (as amended); [63124]

(2) if he will list the charges made by meat hygiene authorities in each EU member state. [63126]

Mr. Rooker: I am currently seeking information about the level of hygiene inspection charges levied on individual meat plants in other EU Members States, including the extent to which the standard charge abatement provision in Council Directive 85/73/EEC is

applied. Once I have received this information, I will write to the hon. Member, although this may take some time.

Milk Production (Inspections)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons his Ministry conducts inspections of milk production. [63130]

Mr. Rooker: The inspections are carried out to monitor compliance with the Dairy Products (Hygiene) Regulations 1995 as amended, which implement Council Directive 92/46/EEC and its subsequent amendments, laying down the health rules for the production and placing on the market of raw milk, heat treated milk and milk based products.

Food Inspections

Mr. Evans: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food for what reasons the cost of food inspections is charged to farmers. [63129]

Mr. Rooker: The dairy hygiene inspections carried out by the Dairy Hygiene Inspectorate are charged to farmers. Charging for inspections was introduced in 1987 as part of the previous administration's policy to recover a proportion of ADAS costs through charges.

Antibiotics

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to implement the recommendations of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, and those of the Copenhagen Conference of EU Chief Medical Officers concerning the use of antibiotics in animal feed; and on what time scale. [63180]

Mr. Rooker: The Government's response to the House of Lords Select Committee report will be published shortly. We support proposals by the European Commission to suspend the use of four antibiotic growth promoters, which would take effect on 1 July 1999.

Organophosphates

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will review the assessment, approval and monitoring mechanisms for veterinary medicines and agricultural pesticides, with particular reference to organophosphate products; and if he will make a statement. [63662]

Mr. Rooker: Agricultural pesticides and veterinary medicines are already subject to rigorous approval systems as regards pesticides, under the Control of Pesticides Regulations 1986 and the Plant Protection Products Regulations 1995 and, for veterinary medicines, the Medicines Act 1968 and the Marketing Authorisations for Veterinary Medicinal Products Regulations 1994.

In order to maintain the quality and consistency of the recommendations made to Ministers, both PSD and VMD continually seek to improve and develop supporting procedures, risk assessment and approval mechanisms. The Report to Ministers of the Official Group on OPs, published earlier this year, included a detailed examination of the regulatory (licensing) system for pesticides and veterinary medicines which can be found in Chapter 6. The Official Group also noted that it had successfully improved the flow of information on all OP product related issues between Departments.

The statutory approval systems for pesticides and veterinary medicines are designed to ensure that these products can be used safely provided the manufacturers instructions are followed. Nevertheless, the Government are still concerned to make sure that the comprehensive arrangements for post-approval monitoring continue to be developed to ensure that nothing slips through the net. In addition, the variability conference held recently in York, which aimed at achieving a better understanding of variable residues of pesticides in food and the development of consumer risk assessment procedures, demonstrates the leading role we take internationally.

The Veterinary Products Committee (VPC) advises Agriculture and Health Ministers on the safety, quality and efficacy of veterinary medicines. The VPC has advised on the safety of organophosphorus (OP) sheep dips, most recently on 17 February 1997. The VPC is currently carrying out a review of other veterinary medicinal products containing OPs and will report to Ministers in 1999. In addition we are undertaking a review of OP and other anticholinesterase pesticides approved under the Control of Pesticide Regulations 1986 as announced on 12 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *68*.

Meat Imports

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent assessment he has made of *(a)* the number of declared and undeclared BSE cases in other EU member states and *(b)* the control mechanism for the import of beef and beef extract products from those countries; and if he will make a statement. [63663]

Mr. Rooker: Figures for confirmed BSE cases in other EU Countries for 1995, 1996, 1997 and to 4 December 1998, supplied to us by the Commission are given in the following table:

EU country	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*	*[1]1998*
Belgium	—	—	1	6
France	3	12	6	14
Germany[2]	—	—	2	—
Luxembourg	—	—	1	—
Netherlands	—	—	2	2
Portugal	14	29	30	83
Republic of Ireland	16	73	77	69

[1] to 4 December 1998

[2] Germany has reported no homebred cases of BSE

The total number of BSE cases reported to the Commission by EU Member States are given in the following table:

Country	*Date of last report*[1]	*No. of cases from UK*	*Total cases*
Belgium	4 December 1998	—	7
Denmark	4 December 1998	1	1
France	4 December 1998	—	46
Germany	4 December 1998	5	6
Italy	4 December 1998	2	2
Luxembourg	4 December 1998	—	1

Country	Date of last report[1]	No. of cases from UK	Total cases
Netherlands	4 December 1998	—	4
Portugal	4 December 1998	7	191
Republic of Ireland	4 December 1998	12	335

[1] Date of last report received—whether indicating no change or an increase in number of confirmed cases.
[2] Germany has reported no homebred cases of BSE. The sixth case is believed to have come from Switzerland.

The UK's SRM controls require all beef and beef products for food and animal feed use imported from other EU member states and third countries to be accompanied by official veterinary certification confirming that they do not contain and were not derived from specified risk materials—the tissues most likely to harbour BSE infectivity. These national controls are in addition to the rules for intra-Community trade.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what testing and inspection procedures are applied to (i) pork, (ii) chicken and (iii) beef being imported into the UK; [63837]

(2) if he will ensure that chicken pieces coming from Brazil meet the health and safety standards which apply to poultry farmers in the UK; [63834]

(3) what steps he has taken to ensure that the British public is not buying contaminated pork or chicken in unprocessed, processed or pre-prepared food products imported from outside the UK. [63836]

Mr. Rooker: All consignments of fresh meat imported into the UK, whether from other EU Member States or third countries, must have been produced in accordance with the harmonised Community rules laid down in Council Directive 64/433/EEC. Among other things, this Directive sets out the licensing, structural and veterinary supervision requirements to be applied in abattoirs, cutting plants and cold stores. Slaughterhouses in third countries have to comply with standards at least equivalent to those laid down in the Directive before they can export to the EU. The European Commission's Food and Veterinary Office are responsible for carrying out inspections in member states and in the third countries from which fresh meat is imported into the Community. If necessary, the Commission will take infraction proceedings against Member States whose arrangements are considered inadequate.

All consignments of animal products imported into the European Union from third countries are subject to checks at designated B order Inspection Posts (BIPs). Community law requires every consignment to be subject to a documentary and identity check. For poultry meat and poultry meat products, other than from countries with which the Community has equivalence agreements, the minimum frequency laid down in Community law for physical checks is 50 per cent. of consignments. For pork and beef and related products the minimum frequency for physical checks is 20 per cent. European Commission guidance states that at least 1 per cent. of consignments which are subject to physical checks at Border Inspection Posts should be randomly sampled for residues, contaminants and bacteria such as salmonella and coliforms. Single Market rules only permit random-spot checks at the final destination on products from other Member States and on products from third countries that have passed through a BIP.

Meat and Livestock Commission

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the representatives of the (i) poultry, (ii) lamb, (iii) beef and (iv) pork producers who sit on the Board of the Meat and Livestock Commission. [63839]

Mr. Rooker: Members of the Commission are not formally appointed as representatives of particular sectors. The following producers are, however, members of the Meat and Livestock Commission:

Mrs. Helen Browning (producer of beef cattle, sheep and pigs)

Mr. Richard Campbell (pigs)

Mr. John (Reg) Roberts (sheep)

Mr. John Ross CBE (beef cattle and sheep).

In addition, the Chairman of the MLC, Mr. Don Curry, is a beef and sheep producer.

The Agriculture Act 1967, which set up the MLC does not permit the Commission to cover the poultry industry.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what new initiatives he is taking to improve the effectiveness of the Meat and Livestock Commission in promoting the sale of British meat products. [63838]

Mr. Rooker: The MLC spent over £20 million in the 1997–98 financial year on promoting beef, lamb and pork. I believe that its work is recognised to be effective and that the Commission itself is best placed to judge where it should concentrate its future effort.

The MLC is currently undergoing a regular five yearly policy review and Ministers will consider all representation made in the course of that review.

Scottish Devolution

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how much is spent annually by his Department on research programmes in Scotland; and what proportion of this funding will be transferred to the Scottish Parliament after devolution. [63284]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* The Ministry funds research to underpin its policy objectives. Decisions on the placing of research contracts are based on the scientific quality and value for money of research proposals and not on the geographical location of contractors. The Ministry paid some £8 million for research projects in Scotland in 1997–98, including projects carried out at Research Council institutes and universities. Post-devolution, the Ministry and the Scottish Office Agriculture, Environment and Fisheries Department will continue to co-operate fully, through the Funders' Group arrangements, to ensure that R&D funded by both departments remains closely co-ordinated and that the results are shared.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what assessment he has made of the programmes which it will be ultra vires for his Department to fund or have sole responsibility for

after devolution; if he will list these programmes; and if he will make a statement; [63286]

(2) if he will list *(a)* by programme over £50,000 and *(b)* the total spending by his Department in Scotland on the identifiable spending areas detailed in Table 7.6A of the Public Expenditure Statistical Analysis 1997–98 (Cmnd 3601); which of these programmes will fall solely or jointly under the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament; and what arrangements are in place to transfer control of funds for these projects to the Scottish Executive or Parliament. [63285]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* Most functions in the agriculture, fisheries and food area will become the responsibility of the devolved administrations following devolution. It is too early to say to what extent programme expenditure which is currently administered by MAFF may relate to functions which will transfer to Scottish Ministers. For the total spending by the Department in Scotland I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by my right hon. Friend the Chief Secretary to the Treasury to the hon. Member for North Tayside (Mr. Swinney) on 4 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *614–15*.

Sheep Annual Premium

Mr. Todd: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has made concerning the proposed suspension of the stabiliser for calculation of sheep annual premium payments. [63495]

Mr. Rooker: The Government are not aware of any formal proposal to suspend the operation of the stabiliser applied under the EU regime for sheepmeat. The right to propose amendments to EU secondary legislation rests solely with the European Commission. Were the Commission to propose the suspension of the sheepmeat stabiliser, we would not support such a proposal, in view of its serious implications for both UK and EU expenditure.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Gill: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what percentage of total CAP expenditure will go to British farmers in the current year; and to which sectors. [63105]

Mr. Rooker: In 1997, the latest year for which data are available, direct payments to UK farmers amounted to some 8% of the total CAP budget. Of this total, 50% were arable payments, 48% livestock (including BSE related payments) and 2% agri-environment and other payments. These figures exclude market support measures such as export refunds which also benefit UK farmers but are not paid directly to them.

Methyl Bromide

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what investigations his Department is carrying out into *(a)* the continued use of the agricultural fumigant methyl bromide and *(b)* the potential reduction of its environmental impact through composted manure. [62965]

Mr. Rooker: The Government are bound by the timetable laid down in the Montreal Protocol to reduce or phase-out substances as methyl bromide which deplete the ozone layer. The Protocol was last amended in September 1997 when it was agreed, for developed countries, to cut production and use of methyl bromide by 50 per cent. by 2001, 70 per cent. by 2003 and phase out by 2005. All member states of the European Union are signatories to the Protocol, which is currently implemented through Council Regulation (EC) 3093/94.

The European Commission has proposed a draft Regulation imposing a more stringent timetable to cut production and phase-out methyl bromide.

Investigations have therefore been carried out into the impact of the phase-out of methyl bromide rather than into its continued use as an agricultural fumigant.

In addition to these investigations a LINK research project to consider alternatives for the horticulture sector commences in April next year. Part of this project aims at improving composting processes to add value to composts made from domestic waste and animal manure by optimising suppressiveness against soil borne diseases.

Animal Feed (Poultry Manure)

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the prevalence of the practice of using poultry manure as the nitrogen content in compound feeds for animals. [62618]

Mr. Rooker: The use of poultry manure as an ingredient of compound animal feeds is prohibited by virtue of Regulation 15(11) of the Feeding Stuffs Regulations 1995.

Horticulture

Mr. Flight: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his Department's policy for encouraging the competitiveness of the UK horticultural industry with regard to other EU countries, in relation to the production of flowers for sale in supermarkets; and if he will make a statement. [63240]

Mr. Rooker: We are actively encouraging the competitiveness of UK horticulture through a research programme worth over £20 million, made up of contributions from the Agriculture Departments and the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council. Over £1.7 million of this is concerned directly or indirectly with ornamental horticulture.

The Ministry funds a strategic R&D programme which includes research into scheduling, improved quality and crop protection of both protected and outdoor flower crops. Specifically there is an on-going project with Horticulture Research International at Kirton to develop a framework for predicting the productivity, quality and availability of outdoor flower crops; this is now in its third year (of five) with a total cost of £385,000.

The Ministry has recently placed a project through open competition with a consortium led by The University of Wales, Cardiff, investigating the biochemistry of post-harvest deterioration of cut flowers with the objective

of improving vaselife. The project will last three years at a total cost of £258,000. The Ministry also plays a full part in securing promotional funding from the European Commission which has as its objective the increase in demand for flowers and plants in the UK and a consequent increase in the sales of British produce. The UK allocation for year one of the scheme (1997–98) was £801,052 (1,079,119 ecu) and £603,833 (867,907 ecu) for year two (1998–99). But additional funding for this year is expected to be available shortly.

Written Answers to Questions

Tuesday 15 December 1998

SCOTLAND

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62847]

Mr. Dewar: My Department employs 3 Special Advisers, Ms Wendy Alexander, Mr. Murray Elder and Mr. David Whitton. Ms Alexander advises specifically on health, the Arts, social work, child care, housing and European affairs. Mr. Elder advises on issues relating to agriculture, the environment, forestry and fisheries, home affairs, devolution, local government and transport matters. In addition, both Ms Alexander and Mr. Elder deal with matters relating to business, industry and education. Mr. David Whitton has particular responsibility for the presentation of policy and relations with the media. Special Advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements. It is not appropriate to give details about particular individuals' level of security clearance.

Highlands and Islands

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the *(a)* landing capabilities and *(b)* designated sites associated with his announcement of expansion to the Highlands and Islands air ambulance service; and if he will make a statement. [63309]

Mr. Galbraith: The announcement concerned the recent contract awards made by the Scottish Ambulance Service NHS Trust, which has secured the continuing provision of Patient Air Transport Services for the people of Scotland. In addition to sustaining the high quality Air Ambulance Service and Air Ambulance High Dependency Service, both of which traditionally use fixed wing aircraft, significant improvements have been made to the Helicopter Emergency Medical Service.

The 2 new helicopters that are being commissioned into service are roomier, faster and quieter than their predecessors. Fully equipped for patient care, the aircraft are built for flying in more adverse weather conditions and in hours of darkness. Both will operate 24 hours a day, 365 days a year with air crew supported by ambulance paramedics and technicians and will be capable of landing at any of the 226 Civil Aviation Authority approved airports, landing strips and other landing sites located across Scotland. Outwith hours of darkness helicopters can land at any site so long as it is safe to do so. I shall write to the hon. Member with a detailed list of all of these locations as soon as possible, and will arrange for a copy to be placed in the Library.

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what is the forecast payment from the European Union with regard to the Highlands and Islands Objective I area for *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [63152]

Mr. Macdonald: In 1997–98, the amounts received from the European Commission with regard to the Highlands and Islands Objective 1 area totalled £24.3 million, while the forecast receipts for 1998–99 amount to £78.9 million. These payments include those made for the purposes of the Highlands and Islands Objective 1 Programme as well as those made in pursuance of various Community Initiatives using the European Union Structural Funds. The amounts shown do not include certain payments made from the Guarantee Section of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund where separate information for the Highlands and Islands Objective 1 area could not be identified except at disproportionate cost. Nor, for the same reason, do they include any payments made by European institutions other than the European Commission.

The amounts received from the Commission as shown do not necessarily correspond in terms of their timing either with the commitment of funds or the payment of funds to individual projects under the Objective 1 Programme or with the Community Initiatives.

Dounreay

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when the Scottish Environment Protection Agency report into fragments of irradiated nuclear fuel in the Dounreay local environment will be received. [64389]

Mr. Galbraith: The report was submitted to my right hon. Friend by the Scottish Environment Protection Agency on 10 December 1998. Copies are available in the House of Commons Library. We have noted the recommendations contained in the report. These are:

> The primary aim should be to restore the area affected by the fishing restrictions and any other affected areas to a clean pristine condition, and that as far as possible, within SEPA's powers, SEPA should insist that UKAEA make all practicable efforts to assist in quantifying the risks involved as a result of the irradiated nuclear fuel fragments in the environment, as a matter of priority and urgency.
>
> In the meantime, applying the precautionary principle, SEPA's advice to the Scottish Office is that the two kilometre fishing restrictions should remain in force.
>
> The public should be kept well informed and any information issued to the public should make clear the low level of risk involved by reference to comparisons with other activities.
>
> The ultimate aim should be to remove the restrictions as soon as possible and, to that end, greater and speedier effort should be made by the UKAEA to find and quantify the extent of contamination in the local marine environment, using the best available methodology and technology.

Accordingly, the two kilometre fishing restrictions will remain in force. Clearly these restrictions cannot be lifted until UKAEA find and quantify the extent of contamination in the local marine environment, and this work should proceed as a matter of urgency. I have asked SEPA to ensure that there is sufficient monitoring in place to ensure that any particles finding their way to the public beach at Sandside are promptly detected and removed.

Television Licence Fees (Non-Payment)

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many prosecutions arose from non-payment of television licence fees in the last year for which figures are available; if he will estimate the number of such prosecutions against women; what was the average fine for non-payment; how many people are currently in prison for non-payment, and how many of these are women; and if evidence from television detector vans or hand-held detectors has been successfully used in any such prosecutions. [62441]

Mr. McLeish: The available information is set out in the table. Custodial sentences for non-payment of a television licence are not available to the courts as a first disposal. Information on the method of detecting such offences is not collected centrally.

In 1996, there were 30 fine default receptions (21 of which involved females) into Scottish penal establishments for non-payment of fines for offences committed under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1949.

Persons proceeded against where the main offence was under the Wireless Telegraphy Act[1] 1949, Scotland, 1996

Main disposal	*Males*	*Females*	*Total*
Persons proceeded against	1,917	3,817	5,734
Persons with a charge proved	1,841	3,762	5,603
Of which:			
Persons fined	1,575	3,207	4,782
Average fine (£)	60	54	56
Persons admonished	251	540	791
Other disposal	15	15	30

[1] Most prosecutions under this Act relate to non-payment of a television licence. Where known, prosecutions for other offences under this Act have been excluded from the table

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Iraq

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral statement of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 668, if he will take steps to seek to refer the Government of Iraq for breaches of the UN Convention on Genocide to the International Court in The Hague. [64113]

Mr. Fatchett: This question has been considered in the past. I will write to the hon. Member on the subject. A copy of the letter will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral answer of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 668, what action he has taken in support of the INDICT campaign to date. [64110]

Mr. Fatchett: We have fully supported the INDICT campaign since its launch in the House last year. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister sent a message to INDICT's press conference earlier this month reconfirming that support. Foreign Office officials keep in regular contact with the INDICT campaign and offer advice and support where needed.

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his oral answer of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 668, if he will take action to indict Tariq Aziz, the Foreign Secretary of Iraq, for war crimes. [64111]

Mr. Fatchett: As the hon. Member will be aware, the INDICT campaign is calling for charges to be brought against key members of Saddam Hussein's regime, including his Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz. HMG fully supports the INDICT campaign as it works toward the day when such people can be brought to book for their crimes.

Chechnya

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library the written advice his Department gave to British companies considering contracts in Chechnya. [64168]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Mrs. Browning) on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *402*.

Mr. Ian Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what *(a)* guidance, *(b)* advice and *(c)* assistance was (i) offered to and (ii) requested by the Chechen authorities in connection with the search for the four hostages. [64167]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: During the 15-month captivity in Chechnya of Camilla Carr and Jon James, and the subsequent tragic kidnap of Rudolf Petschi, Peter Kennedy, Darren Hickey and Stanley Shaw, the FCO, HM Embassy Moscow and the Metropolitan Police corresponded with and held meetings with the Chechen authorities outside Chechnya to discuss the two cases. Some of these contacts followed requests for assistance from the Chechen authorities, but most were at our request. We provided some non-lethal police equipment to the Chechen investigating authorities, to assist them. At the last such meeting, with Chechen Deputy Prime Minister Atgeriev in London on 26 October, we emphasised the need to avoid endangering the four men's lives. Atgeriev agreed that the safety of the hostages was paramount. He confirmed that the equipment provided by the UK had been of assistance to his staff.

Chile (Airbus Sale)

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will estimate the number of hours spent by the Commercial Attaché in the British Embassy, Santiago, Chile since 1 May 1997 in assisting the sale of Airbus aircraft to LAN Chile. [64025]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Airbus Industrie has sought no help from the British Embassy in Santiago with the sale of Airbus to Lan Chile.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Television Licence Fee

Mr. Salter: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he intends to set next year's television

licence fee at the level indicated by the five-year formula announced by the previous Government; and if he will make a statement about future licence fee levels. [64272]

Mr. Chris Smith: On 11 December 1998, *Official Report,* column *636*, the Government announced their intention, after careful consideration, to retain the television licence fee formula for the five years from April 1997 introduced by the previous Government. The formula, based on a report by independent consultants, Braxton Associates, is based on an assessment of the BBC's financial needs and the potential for improved efficiency and the development of alternative sources of revenue. It is designed to allow the BBC to plan its business properly for the period as a whole.

Under the formula, licence fee increases for the five-year period as a whole are set just below inflation as measured by the Retail Prices Index (RPI). However, the increases from 1 April 1999 are set at RPI plus 0.5 per cent., reflecting primarily the additional costs faced by the BBC in launching its new digital services. The formula provides for changes in the licence fee of RPI minus 1 per cent. and RPI minus 2.5 per cent. in 2000–01 and 2001–02 respectively.

Application of the RPI figure of 3.2 per cent. for the year to September 1998, plus 0.5 per cent., to the current unrounded licence fees produces new rounded totals of £101.00 for a colour licence and £33.50 for a black and white licence. The necessary regulations to bring these fees into force will be laid before the House in due course.

Radio Authority

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many staff at the Radio Authority have been *(a)* suspended and *(b)* subsequently dismissed since July; and for what reasons. [63437]

Janet Anderson: I understand that one member of the Radio Authority staff is currently suspended pending the outcome of current police investigations. The Authority has not dismissed any staff since July.

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what measures are in place to monitor the conduct of those staff at the Radio Authority who award broadcast licences to local radio stations and monitor their compliance with the conditions of the licence. [63436]

Janet Anderson: The Radio Authority is a statutory public corporation independent of Government and my Department has no supervisory role in its day-to-day activities. It is the members of the Radio Authority, not its staff, who award broadcast licences for independent local radio. Members are bound by the Authority's detailed code of best practice, a copy of which I have placed in the Libraries of the House. The Authority's members supervise and monitor the Authority's staff, who in turn are bound by the Authority's staff rules and regulations.

Terrestrial Television

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what estimates his Department has made of the percentage of viewers which will be able to obtain access to independent television and digital terrestrial services *(a)* in England and *(b)* in Wales. [63398]

Janet Anderson: The BBC and Independent Television Commission are responsible for transmission arrangements for terrestrial television services in the UK. They estimate that analogue terrestrial television services reach 99.4 per cent. of the UK population and 98.3 per cent. of the population of Wales. The BBC and ITC estimate that the launch phase of digital terrestrial television will deliver services to around 90 per cent. of the UK population, and 70 per cent. in Wales, by the end of 1999. Coverage of each of the six multiplexes will vary and in some cases will be less. The BBC and ITC have jointly produced a CD-Rom containing coverage predictions for each multiplex for each transmitter site. Copies of the CD-Rom have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62843]

Mr. Chris Smith: There are currently two special advisers in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, John Newbiggin and Andy Burnham. The work is divided between the two as appropriate but covers the full range of issues for which I am responsible. Special advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements.

British Library

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what were the *(a)* total building costs and *(b)* fitting out costs when the new British Library was handed over to its new head; and what additional costs have been incurred in respect of *(a)* and *(b)* since that date. [63363]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The new British Library building was legally transferred to the British Library Board on 1 July 1997. By that date the Department had spent an estimated *(a)* £470.1 million on building costs, which included construction of the building, project management and professional services; and *(b)* £28.3 million on fitting out costs which included such items as office and reading room furniture, carpets and book shelving. The equivalent figures at 8 December 1998 stood at *(a)* £476.4 million and *(b)* £28.5 million.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list the fees paid to date to lawyers and consultants for advice or litigation concerning the British Library. [63364]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The fees paid for professional services by lawyers and consultants on the project over the past 16 years, to 8 December 1998, were £71.6 million. This is broken down as follows: architectural services, structural design and quantity surveying (£47.6 million); mechanical and electrical engineering design and advice (£19.7 million); and commercial claims management, legal advice and legal costs (£4.3 million).

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what has been the average *(a)* number of books delivered per reader and *(b)* waiting time for the automated book delivery system in each month since the new British Library opened. [63369]

Mr. Alan Howarth *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* *(a)* The average number of items delivered per reader is as follows:

	Average number of items delivered per reader
December 1997	3
January 1998	3
February 1998	3
March 1998	3
April 1998	3
May 1998	3
June 1998	3
July 1998	3
August 1998	3
September 1998	3
October 1998	3.5

(b) Book delivery performance data are recorded by the percentage of items delivered against benchmarks measured in minutes. The methodology does not lend itself to calculation of average delivery times. In the period during which three of the main reading rooms (Humanities 1 and 2, and the Rare Books and Music Reading Room) have all been open, the percentage of books delivered within an hour of request was as follows:

	Percentage of items delivered within sixty minutes
March 1998	55
April 1998	47
May 1998	47
June 1998	38
July 1998	47
August 1998	42
September 1998	54
October 1998	64

Task Forces and Review Bodies

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many task forces and review bodies are currently in place in his Department; if he will list them; and when they will be reporting their conclusions. [63502]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* My Department has 4 task forces and review bodies. These are listed with their reporting timetables.

1. The Film Policy Action Committee

The Committee was set up to take forward the recommendations of the Film Policy Review, which reported in March 1998. The Committee is due to complete its work by April 1999.

2. The Creative Industries Taskforce

The results of the mapping exercise it instigated were published in November 1998. The Task Force are currently in the process of formulating their forward work programme.

3. The Football Taskforce

The Taskforce has reported to my hon. Friend the Minister for Sport on:

a. Eliminating Racism from Football—30 March 1998;

b. Improving Facilities for Disabled Supporters—29 July 1998.

The Taskforce's report on "Players as role models" is expected by the end of the year and the report on the "Commercial aspects of the game" is expected early in the near year.

4. Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art

The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art produces an annual report, addressed to the Secretary of State which is presented to Parliament. The most recent publication is the forty-fourth report, covering the period 1 July 1997–30 June 1998, which was published by the Stationery Office (Cm 4056) in October 1998. The forty-fifth report (1 July 1998–30 June 1999) will be published in October 1999.

Tourism

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what initiatives are planned by his Department to assist local authorities to develop tourism policies; and if he will make a statement. [63821]

Janet Anderson: Our new tourism strategy, to be published early in 1999, will set out the strategic direction needed to ensure tourism growth that this economically, environmentally and socially sustainable. The strategy highlights the ways in which regional and local tourism strategies can help to increase tourism's benefit to local communities.

In recognition of the economic and social importance of cultural services to local communities, local authorities are also being encouraged to develop Local Cultural Strategies covering the full range of cultural services they offer, including tourism.

Tourist Guides

Mr. Austin: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what market research on tourist guides has been undertaken *(a)* for and *(b)* by the English Tourist Board in the past three years. [63681]

Janet Anderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* No dedicated research on tourist guides has been undertaken for or by the English Tourist Board in the last three years.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Local Government Finance

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list (i) the total provisional standard spending assessments for 1999–2000 for *(a)* Buckinghamshire County Council, *(b)* Aylesbury Vale District Council, *(c)* Chiltern District Council, *(d)* South Buckinghamshire District Council, *(e)* Wycombe District Council, *(f)* Milton Keynes Borough Council and *(g)* Thames Valley Police, indicating the amounts for each major service block within each authority and (ii) the amount of the SSAs as they would have been if calculated by the same formula as in 1998–99. [64169]

Ms Armstrong: The figures are given in the table. Table A shows the 1999–2000 provisional SSAs. Table B shows what the SSAs would have been if calculated by the same formula as in 1998–99, but using data and national control totals for 1999–2000.

Table A: 1999–2000 Provisional SSA

£ million

SSAs	Buckinghamshire	Aylesbury Vale	Chiltern	South Bucks	Wycombe	Milton Keynes	Thames Valley Police
Total	312.891	13.148	6.948	5.232	13.445	167.481	111.927
Education	193.629	—	—	—	—	92.715	—
Personal Social Services	54.624	—	—	—	—	26.411	—
Police	—	—	—	—	—	—	110.569
Fire	11.062	—	—	—	—	3.782	—
Highway Maintenance	17.664	—	—	—	—	7.889	—
Environmental Protective and Cultural	21.056	13.467	7.110	5.366	13.616	30.230	—
Capital Financing	14.856	–0.319	–0.162	–0.133	–0.170	6.543	1.358

Table B: SSA using date and control total for 1999–2000

£ million

SSAs	Buckinghamshire	Aylesbury Vale	Chiltern	South Bucks	Wycombe	Milton Keynes	Thames Valley Police
Total	315.638	13.287	7.041	5.279	13.632	167.369	111.992
Education	194.563	—	—	—	—	93.177	—
Personal Social Services	56.216	—	—	—	—	26.021	—
Police	—	—	—	—	—	—	110.685
Fire	11.115	—	—	—	—	3.800	—
Highway Maintenance	17.749	—	—	—	—	7.926	—
Environmental Protective and Cultural	21.505	13.525	7.143	5.385	13.675	30.251	—
Capital Financing	14.488	–0.238	–0.101	–0.106	–0.042	6.194	1.306

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the impact of the inclusion of sparsity factors into standard spending assessments for each shire county *(a)* in total amounts and *(b)* as a percentage change. [63391]

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for each local authority the increase in standard spending assessment *(a)* for education, *(b)* for social services and *(c)* in total included in the 1999–2000 local government revenue finance settlement. [64200]

Ms Armstrong: The information requested has been placed in the Library.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for 1999–2000 the proposed percentage gains and losses to standard spending assessments for each district council arising from their enhanced population figures, ranked and numbered in descending order. [63181]

Ms Armstrong: The information requested has been placed in the Library, together with a similar table for education authorities.

The calculations have been made by re-estimating the underlying statistical formulae using resident population instead of enhanced population. If such a change in the formula were being contemplated, several other components of the formula would need to be re-examined if its statistical validity was to be maintained.

Mr. Barnes: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list for 1999–2000 the *(a)* proposed external funding included in education SSAs, *(b)* total proposed funding from other grants to LEAs and *(c)* combined amounts for *(a)* and *(b)* as sums per head of pupils in (i) shire counties, (ii) unitary authorities, (iii) Metropolitan authorities and (iv) London authorities ranked and numbered in descending order. [63427]

Ms Armstrong: The main sources of external funding of local authorities are Revenue Support Grant and a share of National Non-Domestic Rates. The amount of these for each local authority is shown in the tables which have been placed in the Library. No distinct amount of Revenue Support Grant or National Non-Domestic Rates is allocated specifically to education. The amount of other grants relating to education proposed for each local education authority will be announced in due course by the Department for Education and Employment.

Inner Thames Marshes

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what English Partnerships has spent on feasibility studies, investigations and the preparation of planning applications for the proposed development in the Inner Thames Marshes SSSI at Havering Riverside, Rainham Marsh; [62882]

(2) if he will list the feasibility studies and investigations carried out by or funded by English Partnerships and those in which English Partnerships has had involvement with regard to the proposed development in the Inner Thames Marshes SSSI at Havering Riverside, Rainham Marsh; [62881]

(3) what plans English Partnerships has to provide financial support to attract development in the Inner Thames Marshes SSSI at Havering Riverside, Rainham Marsh. [62883]

Mr. Caborn: When English Partnerships was formed in 1993 it inherited, acting as Agent for the Secretary of State, a commitment to pay Derelict Land Grant to the

London Borough of Havering worth £156,700 for the preparation of site investigation reports. In 1996, English Partnerships increased this grant to a total of £180,000. In addition, the Agency has paid £149,506 towards the costs of environmental site investigations by LB Havering and amassing supporting evidence for the planning application and has spent a further £20,159 for an assessment of investment demand for the Havering Riverside site.

If planning consent is approved, an application for gap funding may be made to English Partnerships to cover the abnormal costs of developing the Havering Riverside site.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62805]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have today placed in the Library of the House the information requested for those task forces, review panels and advisory groups set up by my Department since 1 May 1997 and still in existence. The list uses the same definitions as in my answer to the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) on 30 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *430–32*.

Water Metering

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate *(a)* the number of one and two person households which would benefit from water metering and *(b)* the amounts of saving forgone by them in each of the past two years, for the current year and for next year, distinguishing between (i) pensioner households and (ii) households including a person on income support or housing benefit. [63242]

Mr. Meale: The following estimates are taken from the report "Incidence Effects of Charging for Domestic Water and Sewerage Services" published by my Department in July 1998. This reported the results of modelling work undertaken on behalf of the Department by Maxwell Stamp Plc. Estimates were produced as percentages rather than numbers in groups.

(a) Under the current tariffs of water undertakers, 66 per cent. of single person households, 31 per cent. of couples with no children nad 38 per cent. of single parents with one child would pay less on a measured than an unmeasured basis. No breakdown has been made of these categories into pensioners and persons on income support or benefit. However, 55 per cent. of all pensioner households and 47 per cent. of all households in which one member was in receipt of income-related benefit would pay less on a measured than an unmeasured basis. These estimates assume no consequent reduction in consumption or tariff rebalancing.

Under a move to a measured basis without standing charge, those gaining would be as follows: 79 per cent. of single person households, 32 per cent. of couples with no children, 43 per cent. of single parents with one child, 63 per cent. of all pensioner households and 54 per cent. of all households in which one member was in receipt of income-related benefit.

(b) Savings figures have not been separately estimated for past or future years. Under current tariffs the distribution of savings for these groups would be as in the following table:

Percentages

Annual Gain	*£0–50*	*£50–100*	*More than £100*
Single adults	32	21	13
Couples with no children	18	7	6
Single parents with one child	20	9	9
Pensioner households	29	16	10
Households with a recipient of income-related benefits	25	13	9

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to require water supply companies to notify customers of the likely range of metered water charges. [63243]

Mr. Meale: The Government's view is that water undertakers should ensure that all their customers are made fully aware of all the charging options open to them without favouring one solution over another.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to require water supply companies to install meters without charge by December 1999 to one and two person households including a person on income support or housing benefit. [63245]

Mr. Meale: The Government's policy, reflected in the Water Industry Bill, is that domestic consumers presently charged on an unmeasured basis should have the option of requesting a measured basis of charging. However, no household should be compulsorily transferred to a measured basis of charging where they are using water only for essential household use.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if it is his policy to allow landlords of short-term tenants to deny them the benefit of metered charges for water. [63244]

Mr. Meale: Under the present provisions of the Water Industry Act 1991, neither tenants nor any other consumers have a legal right to be charged for water on a measured basis, although water undertakers have powers to install meters and to charge any customer on a measured basis.

We propose that domestic water customers should have the right to move to a measured basis of charging for water, free of any initial costs for meter installation. Consumers benefiting from this right would include tenants who pay their own water charges. The Water Industry Bill provides that any contrary provision of any tenancy agreement which might otherwise prevent the installation of a meter is not to block the exercise of this right by tenants. However, the right would not be afforded to tenants on fixed term tenancies of less than six months. It is the Government's view that such tenants do not have

a sufficiently long term interest in the basis of charging for water to warrant over-riding any provision in the tenancy agreement.

Marine Targets Sub-group

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the members of the Marine Targets Sub-group. [63237]

Mr. Meale: The members of the Marine Targets Sub-group are:

Dr. Duncan Shaw, Liverpool University, Chairman

Dr. John Baxter, Scottish Natural Heritage

Joan Edwards, Wildlife Trusts

Dr. Susan Gubbay, Independent Consultant

Dr. Tim Hill, English Nature

Dr. Stephen Lockwood, Centre for Environment, Fisheries & Aquaculture (CEFAS)

Elspeth MacDonald, Fisheries Research Services, Scottish Office

Dr. Mandy McMath, Countryside Council for Wales.

EU Structural Funds

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the forecast payment from the European Union with regard to the Merseyside Objective I area for *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [63153]

Mr. Meale: The payment from the European Union was, for 1997–98, £63.672 million and the forecast payment for 1998–99 was £53.457 million.

The Objective 1 Programme on Merseyside is now close to full commitment and while spend on ERDF, in particular, has been slower than expected this will increase substantially as the Programme draws to a close.

Gatwick Airport

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in which year noise limits were first placed on individual aircraft taking off from Gatwick Airport; and when he expects these limits to be reduced. [63453]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Noise limits on aircraft taking off from Gatwick have applied since 1968. On 24 November 1997 we published a consultation paper proposing lower daytime and night-time noise limits for aircraft departing from Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted and more efficient noise monitoring arrangements. In February 1998 the International Air Transport Association (IATA) submitted an application for leave to apply for judicial review of that consultation paper. The Department subsequently undertook to publish a supplementary consultation paper and IATA withdrew its application for leave to apply for judicial review. We hope to issue the supplementary paper early in the new year. The consultation period will remain open until eight weeks after the supplementary paper is issued. As indicated in the November 1997 consultation paper, if possible the Secretary of State will aim to announce his decision within 3 months of this deadline. If the decision is to implement the proposals as set out, or with only relatively minor alterations, the Secretary of State would seek to bring them into effect within not less than 2, and not more than 3, months of the date of the announcement. Comments have been invited on these timescales as well as on the proposals.

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his estimate of *(a)* the passenger throughput of the Manchester second runway by 2008 and *(b)* the increase in passenger throughput at Gatwick airport up to 2008. [63458]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department publishes national traffic forecasts, the most recent being for the years 2000, 2005, 2010 and 2015. These forecasts split traffic between the London area and the other United Kingdom airports but the Department does not produce forecasts for individual airports. Manchester Airport has not published detailed forecasts for the period beyond 2005, but I understand that the airport company expects passenger throughput to exceed 30 million by 2008. the standard operating procedure will be for arriving aircraft to use the existing runway and for departing aircraft to use the second runway. BAA's most recent 10 year forecasts for its London airports, published in October, include 39.2 million passengers at Gatwick Airport in 2007–08 and 40.0 million in 2008–09.

Air Traffic Control

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the NATS system at Swanwick to be assessed as fit for purpose. [63605]

Ms Glenda Jackson: There are a number of steps to progressively assess the Swanwick system's fitness for purpose. The Technical Transfer, which represents the confirmation that the system is technically ready for operation, is expected in late 2000. NATS will also have to demonstrate the safety of the system to the CAA's Safety Regulation Group before the system can come into operation.

Correspondence

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make it his policy to ensure that all letters from his Department and its agencies use the titles of addressees; and if he will make a statement. [63460]

Mr. Meale: The Department seeks to ensure that all correspondence is correctly addressed to recipients, and includes titles where appropriate.

Public Transport

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what studies his Department has made to determine the proportion of private road and freight journeys which could be achieved on an equal basis by public transport. [63357]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Studies of the potential for modal shift are usually carried out to inform decisions on investment in major public transport projects and to

monitor the effects. Examples of these and other recent studies carried out by the Department or in which it has been involved include:

The M1/A1 (M) Corridor Road/Rail Cross Elasticity Study (May 1994)

Manchester Metrolink Monitoring Study (December 1996)

Sheffield Supertram Monitoring Study (expected 1999)

The Trans-Pennine Rail Strategy Study (January 1992)

Impact of Transport Policies in Five Cities (November 1994).

In relation to the potential for shifting freight journeys from road to rail, the Office of the Rail Regulator commissioned the following study:

"The Potential for Rail Freight: A report to the Office of the Rail Regulator" (September 1997).

In addition, the environmental benefits of reducing lorry journeys are taken into account in assessing applications for freight grants.

Departmental Staff (Kandola Report)

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what assessment he has made of the report by Pearn Kandola in relation to discrimination in his Department on grounds of *(a)* race and *(b)* gender; [63351]

(2) what factors underlay the commissioning of a review of his Department's staff appraisal system by Pearn Kandola; [63354]

(3) what were the findings of the report commissioned by his Department into his Department's staff appraisal system, undertaken by Pearn Kandola; [63337]

(4) if the report by Pearn Kandola into his Department's staff appraisal system identified the causes of the statistically significant differences in performance marking between ethnic minorities and whites; [63349]

(5) what advice he has received from officials on the compliance of departmental staff appraisal systems with requirements to be non-discriminatory; [63353]

(6) if the report by Pearn Kandola into his Department's staff appraisal system identified the causes of the statistically significant differences in performance marking between men and women in certain grades; [63350]

(7) what was the cost of the study of his Department's staff appraisal system by Pearn Kandola; [63355]

(8) if he will make a statement on staff concerns relating to racial discrimination contained in the Pearn Kandola report into his Department's staff appraisal system; [63348]

(9) if he will publish the report by Pearn Kandola into his Department's staff appraisal system; [63352]

(10) what action he is taking on the findings of the study by Pearn Kandola into his Department's staff appraisal system. [63356]

Mr. Meale: The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is committed to equality of opportunity. All DETR staff have a right to fair treatment throughout their careers regardless of race, ethnic or national origin, age, religion, gender, marital status, disability or sexual orientation.

As part of our commitment to equality of opportunity, my Department monitors and compares the annual performance and promotability of its staff by gender, ethnicity, disability and part/full-time working. When the analysis of performance reports for staff in the central Department for the year to 31 March 1998 was carried out, a number of statistically significant differences were identified in relation to gender, ethnic and other groups: the performance marks for women were significantly higher than those for men in administrative grades, and white staff received higher marks than ethnic minority staff at Executive Officer and Personal Secretary level.

In the light of these findings, Pearn Kandola, a firm of occupational psychologists, were appointed to carry out an independent study of the appraisal system.

The Pearn Kandola report was completed in the first week of December. It concluded that overall, from the evidence looked at, the appraisal system on balance appeared to be fair. The specific cause or causes of the differences in report markings could not be identified. The report made a number of recommendations on how the system could be improved which the Department will be acting on.

The cost of the study was £32,000.

I have placed copies of the full report in the House of Commons Library.

The issues raised by the report are currently under consideration.

Departmental Responsibilities

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions which UK-wide or Britain-wide programmes will be the responsibility of his Department after the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament; and what is the forecast level of expenditure on such programmes in 1998–99. [63481]

Mr. Meale: The Government of Wales Act 1998 provided for a Transfer of Functions Order to be made to transfer Ministerial functions to the National Assembly for Wales. The order was published in draft for public consultation on 12 November 1998. Work is continuing within Government to finalise the text of the Order and until work is completed, it is not possible to state with certainty what functions will transfer to the Welsh Assembly. Similarly, the functions which will be devolved to the Scottish Parliament under the Scotland Act 1998, depend in part on secondary legislation which has yet to be passed. My Department is reviewing its programmes to establish whether any programme expenditure relates to the functions which are being devolved and to assess the need for any consequential transfer of funds to the Welsh Assembly and Scottish Parliament.

Detrunked Roads

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what his policy is in respect of the maintenance of detrunked roads, where that maintenance is currently subject to a DBFO agreement. [63557]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The A30/35 Exeter to Bere Regis project is the only DBFO project affected by detrunking proposals. The Highways Agency will discuss the implications of detrunking this road with all the interested parties, to ensure that it continues to be maintained to proper standards.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what formula he will apply to determine the funding to be transferred to highway authorities in respect of detrunked roads. [63383]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My right hon. Friend the Minister of Transport has made it clear that there will be a fair re-allocation of resources to reflect the financial responsibilities which local authorities will assume when roads are actually detrunked. The arrangements for achieving this objective are currently the subject of consultation with the Local Government Association.

Emission Targets (Kyoto)

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the progress made in achieving the CO_2 reduction targets agreed at Kyoto for the United Kingdom. [63614]

Mr. Meale *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* On 26 October 1998, the Government published a consultation paper on climate change. The paper describes progress to date in reducing greenhouse gas emissions in the UK and sets out a variety of policy options for meeting our climate change targets. It covers both the UK's legally binding target from Kyoto of a 12.5 per cent. reduction in a basket of six greenhouse gases by 2008–2012 and our domestic goal of a 20 per cent. reduction in carbon dioxide emissions by 2010. Following the consultation period, we will develop and consult on a new UK climate change programme.

Action has already been taken to reduce the UK's emissions of greenhouse gases. For example, the Government have introduced their integrated transport policy; we have increased the fuel duty escalator to an average of 6 per cent. above inflation per year; the European car industry has negotiated a voluntary agreement to reduce emissions of CO_2 from new cars by an average of 25 per cent.; Lord Marshall has reported on the scope for using economic instruments to improve business's use of energy; we have launched a review of what would be necessary and practicable to deliver 10 per cent. of electricity demand from renewable sources by 2010; and we have increased resources for energy efficiency.

Rolling Stock Companies (Safety Compliance)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *115*, concerning rolling stock companies, what responsibility the ROSCOs have to comply with the requirements of the Health and Safety Executive. [63413]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Rolling Stock Companies (ROSCOs) have a responsibility to comply with the requirements relating to them under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and its statutory provisions. The Health and Safety Executive monitors and enforces compliance with these requirements.

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *115*, concerning rolling stock companies, what responsibility the Franchising Director has to the franchisee if the HSE's requirements in respect of rolling stock change during the life of a franchise. [63412]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Under the terms of the Franchise Agreement there are arrangements in place for the Franchising Director to meet up to 95 per cent. of the costs falling on a train operating company for modification to rolling stock which is required to be made under any applicable law, any Government authority or any directives from Railtrack relating to safety. These directives could relate to Acts of Parliament and/or directives originating from Railway Group Standards. Railway Group Standards are rules, regulations, instructions and procedures which are produced as mandatory operational and engineering standards and all relate to safety aspects of the operation of railways and are set and enforced by Railtrack.

New Housing Development

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he plans to issue guidance on a sequential approach to selecting locations for new housing development and sites. [64151]

Mr. Caborn: Guidance on the approach to the selection of locations and sites for housing will be included in the draft new planning policy guidance note on housing (PPG3) which will be issued early next year.

A14

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what change in traffic levels on the A14 in Cambridgeshire is predicted as a result of the opening of the A1(M) south of Peterborough. [63534]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The upgrading of the A1 to motorway status between Alconbury and Peterborough is not expected to result in any increase in traffic levels over and above that due to general growth in traffic on the A14.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63870]

Mr. Meale: The over-riding principle of Civil Service recruitment procedures is that they should be fair, and selection should be on merit at each stage. Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin rather than nationality. The categories monitored by my Department are based on those used in the 1991 census, which did not include an Irish category. The categories will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Road Traffic Targets

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the representations he has received which opposed the setting of specific targets to reduce road traffic volumes. [63384]

Ms Glenda Jackson: My Department does not maintain a detailed central record of the views expressed on particular issues in all written and oral representations made to the Secretary of State. A comprehensive answer to the hon. Member's question could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

We have, however, extracted the following information on opposition to national road traffic reduction targets from our database of the responses to the Government's August 1997 consultation on developing an integrated transport policy. (A summary report on those responses was published in July 1998). Five respondents indicated that they did not support national road traffic reduction targets. Of these, one was a member of the public and the remaining four were:

Ford Motor Company Ltd.

The Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders Ltd.

Environmental Transport Association

Civil Engineering Contractors Association.

Copies of all the written responses, except those where confidentiality was requested, are available for inspection by arrangement at the Department's library at Ashdown House, 123 Victoria Street, London SW1E 6RB.

Aircraft Emissions

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the Government's target for percentage reduction in emissions from aircraft; and what proportion of the Government's planned 20 per cent. reduction in carbon emissions this constitutes. [63641]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government are currently consulting on options to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases and meet their climate change targets. Our consultation paper looks at a wide range of options. It does not propose targets for particular sectors. Our aim is to develop a balanced climate change programme where all sectors play a part.

Only the emissions from domestic flights, beginning and ending within the UK, are included in our national inventory. These account for around 11 per cent. of total emissions from UK originating air traffic. The UK is working within the International Civil Aviation Organisation, which was given the responsibility under the Kyoto Protocol, on ways of reducing emissions from international aviation.

Railway Stations

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what steps he will take to ensure that improvements carried out to stations on behalf of, and at the expense of, train operating companies are not subject to excessive charges by Railtrack. [63631]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Rail Regulator is responsible for setting the access charges which meet Railtrack's costs of maintaining and repairing station infrastructure. The Regulator is presently reviewing all Railtrack's access charges and is required to publish his final conclusions by July 2000. In addition, the Regulator's approval is required for any changes to station access charges which Railtrack may agree with a train operator as a result of investment in station improvements. On 5 December, the Regulator issued guidelines to the industry designed to ensure that any such changes to meet Railtrack's additional costs from enhancing station facilities are justified and calculated in a fair, consistent and transparent manner.

Aviation Fuel

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what *(a)* discussions and *(b)* studies his Department is supporting in respect of the taxation of aviation fuel; and if he will make a statement. [63642]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The UK supported the Community Resolution of 9 June 1997 which asked the European Commission to study the environmental and economic effects in Europe of a tax on aviation fuel. The study report is expected early next year.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) agreed a work programme for its Committee on Aviation Environmental Protection in October this year. This includes the need to identify and evaluate the role which a range of market based options, including fuel taxes, might play in reducing aviation emissions. My Department will continue to play a leading role in this work programme which must be completed before the next ICAO Assembly in 2001.

British Rail

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *36*, what the reasons were for the size of the increase in the external finance requirement for the British Railways Board between 1996–97 and 1997–98. [63905]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The increase in the British Railways Board's external finance requirement between 1996–97 and 1997–98 reflects the combined effects of large changes in the Board's finances. In particular, as a result of privatisation, the Board's turnover fell from £3,397 million in 1996–97 including grants of £1,507 million, to just £231 million in 1997–98 including grants of £51 million.

A26 and A27

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to introduce safety improvements to *(a)* the A26 Beddingham-Newhaven and *(b)* the A27 Lewes-Polegate. [63558]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Highways Agency has introduced a number of safety improvements on the A26

between Beddingham and Newhaven and the A27 between Lewes and Polegate respectively and has plans to introduce more. These are:

(a) A26 Beddingham to Newhaven

South Downs Way Crossing—a study is underway with a view to providing a signal controlled pedestrian/cycle/equestrian crossing.

Beddingham Warning Sign—'Queues Likely' sign is about to be erected to the south of Beddingham roundabout.

Itford Farm Layby—study is in progress with a view to providing a layby in the vicinity of the South Downs Way.

Resurfacing—the skidding resistance of most of the carriageway from north of the Beddingham landfill sites to the Tarring Neville junction is programmed to increased early in the new year.

(b) A27 Lewes to Polegate

Lewes—Polegate—a study of the double white lining system has currently been completed and improvements are due to be implemented shortly.

Willington Cross Road—a scheme to provide a right turn facility is being prepared and subject to land acquisition, is expected to be implemented in the next financial year. If SUSTRANS opts for National Cycle Route at this point on the trunk road the scheme will include a light controlled 'Toucan' pedestrian crossing.

Aberdale Road, Polegate, Cycle Crossing—a SUSTRANS sponsored National Cycle Route Crossing of the trunk Road involving the provision of a light-controlled 'Toucan' pedestrian crossing is programmed in the current financial year.

Southerham to Ranscombe Lane Cycle Route—a scheme is in preparation and is expected to be implemented during the next financial year.

Beddingham Footways—a study is in hand to establish the provision of footways between laybys on either side of the railway level crossing and crossings telephones.

A22 Junction (South)—consideration is being given to upgrading the traffic signals at this busy junction and to linking them with the A22 Wannock Road signals.

Firle Cycle Track—a study is underway with a view to providing a cycle track between the Glynde junction and Middle farm, programmed for this financial year.

Southerham Roundabout—a study is in hand to provide dedicated lanes at this very busy junction.

Sameston—a lower speed limit is planned for early in the new year and crash protection for 'Corner Cottage' is currently being designed.

Rail Safety

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the impact of *(a)* staffing reductions and *(b)* dividend payments by Railtrack on the performance of its rail safety responsibilities. [63645]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Under the Railways (Safety Case) Regulations 1994, reductions in staffing levels would require amendment to a Railway Safety Case where this might affect safety. The Health and Safety Executive's (HSE's) Railway Inspectorate monitors compliance with the Regulations and will take whatever action it considers appropriate to ensure safety is not compromised.

Dividend payments are a commercial matter for Railtrack's Board of Directors.

Members Car Parking Charges

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for introducing car parking charges for hon. Members within the parliamentary estate; and what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the financial incentives of the scheme. [63632]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Greater London Authority Bill will enable London's elected Mayor to levy a charge on non-residential workplace parking. Alternatively the London Borough of Westminster will be able to introduce a levy within its boundary, subject to the agreement of the Mayor. The Bill provides that, if any scheme is brought forward in the Westminster area, it will be able to apply to the parliamentary estate. The charge would be payable by the Corporate Officer of the House. Whether or not to pass the charge on to individual Members would be for the House itself to determine.

Railways (Carnet Tickets)

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is his policy in respect of the issuing of carnet tickets by train operating companies. [63644]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government's White Paper on the Future of Transport (Cm 3950) made it clear that we consider that carnets are a desirable alternative to season tickets. They would be a particular benefit to part-time workers as well as occasional travellers and we wish to encourage all rail (and indeed other transport) operators to offer them as part of their ticketing range. The current arrangements for fares are a consequence of legally binding franchise agreements inherited from the previous Government. When opportunities arise for negotiating franchises, the structure and marketing of fares is one of the areas in which the new Strategic Rail Authority will look for improvements.

Local Transport Plans

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received on his proposals with regard to local transport plans. [63555]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government's proposals for local transport plans were announced in the White Paper on the future of transport "A New Deal for Transport: Better for Everyone". We have received numerous representations following the White Paper, many of which have included consideration of local transport plans. These helped inform our draft guidance for local authorities on local transport plans, which was published for consultation on 12 November. The consultation period ends on 8 January 1999.

Local Agenda 21

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received from local authorities on the Local Agenda 21 environmental strategies. [63554]

Mr. Meale: We receive representations on a range of matters relating to sustainable development, including from local authorities on Local Agenda 21 strategies.

Pesticides

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) if he will make it his policy to exclude pesticides used in horticulture from the proposed environmental tax on pesticides; and if he will make a statement; [64031]

(2) what estimates he has made of the price elasticity of demand for different types of pesticides during his consideration of the proposed environmental tax on pesticides; and if he will make a statement. [64032]

Mr. Meale: The Government have not made a proposal for a pesticide tax. However, my Department has commissioned extensive research into the scope for a pesticide tax or charge, including sectoral usage, consideration of price elasticities of demand for different pesticides, and the impact on users, manufacturers and suppliers. The Government will take this work fully into account in reaching a decision on whether to introduce such an instrument.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedules)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the offices or agencies under his control which will be subject to L.2 of Head L in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998; how many people are currently employed in these offices; and what equal opportunities practices are adopted in these offices. [63806]

Mr. Meale: I will write to the hon. Member with this information, and place a copy of the letter in the Library of the House.

Northern Line

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what extra funds his Department has given to London Underground since August 1998 for the provision of the new trains on the Northern Line. [64112]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department does not provide funds specifically for the new Northern Line trains. However, when making decisions on the overall level of funding for London Transport, the Government take into account the payments which London Transport are required to pay to PFI contractors. This includes the deal with ALSTOM for the new Northern Line trains.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* the number of train cancellations and *(b)* the punctuality performance on Northern Line services for each day since 1 November. [64105]

Ms Glenda Jackson: This information is not available in the form requested. London Underground measure their performance against a series of Key Performance Indicators and data on performance are collected for weekdays only and presented for each 4-week period.

In the period from 9 November to 4 December, a total of 406 trains were cancelled at weekday morning and evening peak times out of a total number of 3,360 scheduled trains. This means that 87.9 per cent. of scheduled trains were in service during the period compared with the target of 98.3 per cent.

London Underground base their punctuality measure on whether the scheduled time interval between trains—the 'headway'—was achieved. This is expressed as a percentage of the total number of headways during weekdays. The following table sets out the latest data available from London Underground and covers the period from 2 November to Friday 4 December (inclusive).

Date	*Percentage of headways achieved*
2 November	89.3
3 November	91.2
4 November	90.5
5 November	85.1
6 November	88.4
9 November	85.0
10 November	85.4
11 November	88.5
12 November	89.3
13 November	92.4
16 November	91.7
17 November	88.4
18 November	88.2
19 November	88.6
20 November	88.8
23 November	90.2
24 November	92.5
25 November	91.9
26 November	89.3
27 November	91.0
30 November	83.7
1 December	86.5
2 December	79.5
3 December	89.6
4 December	84.9
Target	94.4

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many complaints his Department has received concerning the service on the Northern Line since 1 September. [64106]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Since 1 September the Department has received 26 letters relating wholly or mainly to the poor service on the Northern Line. Establishing the total number of letters which refer to poor performance on the Northern Line could be done only at disproportionate cost, because letters are often wide-ranging and only the main issue raised is logged.

Building Regulations (Control Charges)

Dr. Starkey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress has been made on devolving the setting of Building Regulations control charges to individual local authorities in England and Wales. [64386]

Mr. Raynsford: A consultation paper on draft regulations to devolve the setting of Building Regulations control charges to individual local authorities in England and Wales with building control functions, was published in June this year. Having considered the responses I announced my decision on 31 July to proceed to lay regulations with a coming into force date of 1 April next year. I have today laid those regulations before Parliament. They are entitled "The Building (Local Authority Charges) Regulations 1998".

An essential part of operating this new system of charging will be the making of a Scheme by each local authority responsible for building control in order to fix those charges and administer the charging process. The Department is therefore publishing a Circular whose primary purpose is to give guidance to local authorities on how to produce a Scheme. This will be available shortly.

Somerset Levels (Water Management)

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what advice he has given to the Environment Agency concerning the implications for the management of water levels on the Somerset Levels of *(a)* the EU Birds Directive, *(b)* the EU Habitats Directive, *(c)* the Water Resources Act 1991 and *(d)* the Land Drainage Acts. [63394]

Mr. Morley: I have been asked to reply.

The Environment Agency is the principal flood defence operating authority and, in exercising those functions, is subject to the conservation duties placed on it by sections 7 and 8 of the Environment Act 1995. The Agency is required to have regard to the Habitats and Birds Directives in exercising its functions, as it is a "competent authority" under the terms of the Habitats Directive. It is also required to make an appropriate assessment of the impact before approving any plans or projects which, on their own or in combination with other plans or projects, may affect a European site. The Ministry and Welsh Office have issued a Code of Practice on Environmental Procedures for Flood Defence Operating Authorities which includes specific guidance on the responsibilities of the Agency and the other operating authorities under the Habitats and Birds Directives.

The Ministry and Welsh Office have also issued guidance to the Environment Agency and other flood defence operating authorities on the production of Water Level Management Plans. The plans provide a means by which the range of activities in a particular area, including agriculture, flood defence and conservation can be balanced and integrated. We have encouraged preparation of such plans with highest priority being given to internationally important sites, including those designated under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives. Water Level Management Plans are in preparation on the Somerset Levels, with the majority being produced by internal drainage boards, as the relevant operating authority.

TREASURY

Road and Parking Charges

Mr. Baker: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what percentage of the money raised through *(a)* road pricing and *(b)* workplace charging will be hypothecated for public transport improvements. [63639]

Ms Hewitt: The Government propose (as laid out in the recently published consultation document—"Breaking the Logjam") that local authorities which bring forward pilot road user charging or workplace parking charge schemes should be able to retain 100 per cent. of the net revenue generated for at least 10 years from the implementation of a scheme—provided that there are worthwhile transport-related projects to be funded.

The Government will make an announcement about the retention of proceeds from schemes brought forward after the pilot phase in due course.

Tax Credits (Abolition)

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which Minister is currently responsible for reviewing the policy of abolishing tax credits for non-taxpayers; and if he will make a statement. [64197]

Mr. Gordon Brown: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *346*.

Single Currency

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish the changeover plans regarding preparations for British entry into the single currency. [63865]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The outline changeover plan should be published early in 1999.

VAT (Golf Clubs)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to harmonise the VAT exemption for proprietary and private golf clubs. [62605]

Dawn Primarolo: The Government understand the problems of both types of golf club and have arranged for HM Customs and Excise to discuss these with the European Commission, in the light of the recent European Court of Justice ruling in Commission of the European Communities vs. the Kingdom of Spain (Case C-124/96, Judgment of the Court, Sixth Chamber, of 7 May 1998).

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the inclusion of the Irish as an ethnic category in the next census. [63868]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's proposals for the 2001 Census, including the topics to be covered and details of the ethnic question, will be published in a White Paper early next year.

DEFENCE

Challenger 2 Tanks

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the new transporters for Challenger 2 tanks. [64276]

Mr. Spellar: The MOD will shortly issue an invitation to four consortia to negotiate for a private-sector financed solution to the Army's heavy equipment transporter requirement, with the aim that the service is provide from 2002. This is the first programme to invite solutions to invite solutions for an operational combat support vehicle

through the Private Finance Initiative. The consortia are also being invited to explore options for the employment of Sponsored Reserves to deliver the service. A decision on the way forward is expected in early 2000, with a contract let later that year following final negotiations with the preferred bidder.

Queen Victoria School

Miss Begg: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the key targets are for 1998–99 for the Chief Executive of Queen Victoria School. [64271]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Chief Executive of Queen Victoria School has been set the following Key Targets for 1998–1999.

1. Achieve a staying on rate at School for S4 to S5 of at least 68 per cent. based on a 3 year trend.
2. Exceed by 2 per cent. the average percentage pass rate for all Scottish presentations obtaining 5 or more Credit awards at Standard Grade based on a 3 year trend.
3. Achieve a percentage of the presentations at Higher Grade achieving A to C grade greater than or equal to the Scottish averaged based on a 3 year trend.
4. To achieve a pupil per capital cost of no more than £17,246 (at 1997–98 prices) by March 1999. 1997–98 target was £17,420.
5. To generate commercial income to the School of at least £20,000.

Duke of York's Royal Military School

Mr. Prosser: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the key targets for 1998–99 for the Chief Executive of the Duke of York's Royal Military School. [64273]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Chief Executive of The Duke of York's Royal Military School has been set the following Key Targets for 1998–99.

1. To achieve 100 per cent. of GCSE passes at grades A* to G.
2. To achieve 5 or more GCSE passes at grades A* to C; 1998–99 target is 78 per cent.
3. To achieve 88 per cent. of A level passes at grades A to E.
4. To achieve 3 or more A level passes at grades A to E; 1998–99 target is 80 per cent.
5. To achieve 34 per cent. of A level passes at Grades A and B.
6. To achieve 100 per cent. award rate for GNVQ Advanced and BTEC National Diploma courses.
7. To achieve places in higher education for at least 70 per cent. of sixth form leavers.
8. To achieve a pupil per capita cost of no more than £13,151.
9. To generate income of at least £452,000.
10. To achieve at least 260 applications for September 99 intake.

Nuclear Weapons

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will publish in the *Official Report* the text of the letter dated 30 November from the Minister of State for the Armed Forces to his hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) concerning nuclear, chemical and biological weapons in the former Soviet Union. [63900]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Following is the text of the letter to which I understand my hon. Friend refers.

Letter from the Secretary of State for Defence to Mr. Alan Simpson, dated 30 November 1998:

In my answer to your Parliamentary Questions on 19 November, (Official Report, cols 712–713). I undertook to write to you about certain aspects of Trident computer systems.

You asked first about the percentage of computer chips purchased "off the shelf" from suppliers. The Trident Strategic Weapon System was procured "off the shelf" from the US Government under the provisions of the Polaris Sales Agreement as amended for Trident. It is not, therefore, possible to provide the level of detail called for in the question. However the US has a programme of work to provide certification of Year 2000 compliance for all items associated with the system procured by the UK.

As far as your question about audits and action plans on millennium compliance is concerned, I can tell you that a comprehensive audit of the deterrent is being conducted by a dedicated Deterrent Millennium Task Group. At the top level this includes areas such as the missile and warhead, fire control, navigation, targeting, firing chain, reactor and propulsion control, sonar, command and control and all associated shore based facilities. Each of these areas is further sub-divided into many hundreds of smaller sub-systems, each of which is being investigated. Extensive tests are being conducted on all equipment associated with the Trident Weapon System and its supporting infrastructure to confirm that it will not be affected by any key dates before, during and after the turn of the century. A programme of trials is in place to provide further verification. I trust this also addresses your question about systems identified as being critical to the safe and continuous operation of the Trident system. It would not be in the national interest to disclose the details of our audits and investigations as this would reveal information which could compromise the effectiveness of the UK's strategic deterrent. I am therefore withholding this information under exemption 1, Defence, security and International relations, of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

As far as our discussions with the US are concerned, we are working extremely closely to ensure that common equipment critical to each nation's defence capability, including Trident, are millennium compliant. In addition to the regular, frequent meetings on the wider Year 2000 problem, regular meetings are held with the US under the provisions of the Polaris Sales Agreement with Year 2000 compliance one of the items on the agenda: The most recent such meeting was on 10 November. The US programme I have already mentioned has a forecast date for completion of 31 December this year.

You also asked about planned expenditure to ensure millennium compliance of the Trident systems. There is no separately identified central record of planned millennium compliance expenditure specifically related to the Trident system. I would, however, refer you to the answer given by Margaret Beckett to Maria Eagle on 21 October in which she announced the results of the latest quarterly review of Government departments and agencies progress in tackling the bug. The results of the next quarterly review will be announced shortly to the House and the updates to quarterly plans will be placed in the Library of the House and on the internet.

Finally, there is no central record of the number of staff dedicated to ensuring the Trident systems's millennium compliance which you also requested. However, staff in relevant appointments are working to ensure the status of all systems is identified and that action plans are in place where required.

I am copying this letter to Llew Smith to whom I also undertook to write in respect of his question on the issue of millennium compliance of nuclear systems.

I hope this is helpful.

I am placing a copy of this letter in the Library of the House.

Surveillance Towers (Northern Ireland)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the total annual cost of staffing and maintaining surveillance towers *(a)* at the hilltop sites in the South Armagh area, *(b)* the two towers in Derry and *(c)* the three posts mounted on blocks of flats in Belfast. [64204]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer my hon. Friend to the written answer given by my right hon. Friend the then Minister for the Armed Forces on 6 November 1997, *Official Report*, column *320*.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the offices or agencies under his control which will be subject to L.2 of Head L in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998; how many people are currently employed in these offices; and what equal opportunities practices are adopted in these offices. [63804]

Mr. Doug Henderson: There were some 23,200 Service and civilian personnel based at 116 locations in Scotland, as at 1 April 1998 (the most recent date for which figures are available). All of these personnel will continue to be subject to the appropriate UK legislation. For the 10,000 civilian personnel this involves compliance with the Equal Pay Act 1970, the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, the Race Relations Act 1976, and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, listed in Head L2 of Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act, as well as Departmental policies against unfair discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation, age and religious belief. In order for the Armed Forces to maintain combat effectiveness they are granted an exemption from the Sex Discrimination Act 1975, in Section 85(4) of the Act, and from the employment provisions of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. Current policy is also that homosexuals are not allowed to serve in the Armed Forces; this issue will be reviewed in the lifetime of this Parliament. Aside from these specific exceptions the Armed Forces are committed to equality of opportunity irrespective of gender, religion, ethnic or social background and vigorous policies are in place to ensure that this is achieved.

Service Women (Pregnancy)

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what total expenditure his Department has incurred to date in the payment of claims for compensation by service women required to leave the armed forces on grounds of pregnancy. [64010]

Mr. Doug Henderson: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave on 10 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *257* to the hon. Member for New Forest, West (Mr. Swayne).

Louise Jensen

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what was the cost to his Department of the defence of the British soldiers convicted of causing the death of a Danish tour guide in Cyprus. [63343]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The costs of the defence and subsequent appeal of the soldiers convicted of causing the death of the Danish tour guide were met by the Army Legal Aid scheme, and have been £260K to date. This figure does not include the cost of the appeals process which has only recently concluded.

The Army Legal Aid scheme provides legal assistance to Army personnel similar to that available in this country to ensure that they are not placed at a disadvantage when tried overseas in a civil criminal court; the scheme is funded by my Department.

Polo Ponies

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many polo ponies the British Army owns; and in which countries they are based. [63990]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The British Army does not own polo ponies. All military horses maintained by the Army fulfil either ceremonial duties or work in the Army School of Equitation.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63878]

Mr. Spellar: My Department's ethnic monitoring of Service and civilian recruitment is based solely on an applicant's ethnicity. The nine ethnic origin categories monitored by my Department are those used in the 1991 census which did not include an Irish category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Hunting

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what has been the cost since 1 May 1997 of supplying military police to protect huntsmen on MOD land from potential activity by anti-hunt protesters. [63638]

Mr. Spellar: Military Police are not involved with hunts, so no costs have been incurred from protecting huntsmen.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the occasions since 1 May 1997 when authorisation has been given for MOD land to be used for hunting; and if he will indicate those occasions when hunting occurred on land designated as a site of special scientific interest, giving for each occasion the location of the SSSI. [63637]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what charges have been made and to which hunts for the use of MOD land since 1 May 1997. [63634]

Mr. Spellar: The table shows charges which have been paid since 1 May 1997 allowing hunting with hounds to take place over the Defence Estate.

The following charges have been paid since 1 May 1997 allowing hunting with hounds to take place over the Defence estate:

Hunt	Charges since 1 May 1997 (£)	Comments
Tanatside Hunt	158.75	
North Shropshire Hunt	179.37	
Surrey Union Hunt	398.13	
Blankney Hunt	208.75	
Essex and Suffolk Hunt	405.75	
Thorney Island Hunt	39.38	The previous Commanding Officer used to invite the Hunt onto the Island for one day a year—this has now ceased
East Kent Hunt	172.75	
South Pembrokeshire Hunt	39.60	
Sennybridge Hunt	160.89	
Brecon and Talybont Hunt	160.89	
Irfon and Tywi Hunt	160.89	
Taunton Vale Foxhounds	80.00	There is a reciprocal agreement in place whereby land is licenced to the MOD
West of Yore Hunt	170.18	
Bedale Hunt	170.18	
Zetland Hunt	170.18	
Wensleydale Hunt	36.43	
Ullswater Foxhounds	152.37	
Lunesdale Foxhounds	57.12	
Border Hunt	175.12	
West Percy Hunt	175.12	
Avon Vale Hunt	375.00	
Tedworth Hunt	125.00	
Royal Artillery Hunt	225.00	
South and West Wiltshire Hunt	225.00	
Bewcastle Hunt	177.22	Licence to pass over MOD land only
Tynedale Hunt	233.62	Licence to pass over MOD land only

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the occasions since 1 May 1997 when his Departments' buildings have been used for purposes connected with hunting. [63633]

Mr. Spellar: This information is not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the MOD units which have hunt kennels on their land, indicating in each case the rent charged for the use of these kennels. [63635]

Mr. Spellar: The MOD units which have hunt kennels on their land are as follows:

Britannia Royal Naval College—Kennels for beagles. Charges made for utilities only and for this Financial Year this stands at £55.

Catterick Garrison—Kennels for Catterick Garrison Beagles—£1,698 per annum.

Larkhill Garrison—Royal Artillery Hunt—Encroachment. (No charge)

RMA Sandhurst—Beagle kennels—Encroachment. (No charge)

RMCS Shrivenham—Beagle kennels—Encroachment. (No charge).

An encroachment is granted for authorised sporting, recreational and welfare activities in accordance with guidelines in the Joint Services Publication 362 Defence Lands Handbook, a copy of which is in the Library of the House.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which MOD units permit their personnel to hunt during normal working hours, with particular reference to the Wednesday afternoon sports period. [63636]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list *(a)* total expenditure and *(b)* expenditure by programme by his Department in Scotland on areas covered by the exception under E.3 of Head E in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998. [63803]

Mr. Doug Henderson: This information is not held and could be provided only at disproportionate cost. I thus regret I am unable to answer under Exemption 9 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information.

Chile

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many members of his Department's Defence Sales Organisation visited Chile in each year since 1990. [64022]

Mr. George Robertson: I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many officers of the British armed forces of one star status or above visited Chile in each year since 1990. [64013]

Mr. George Robertson: The information requested is not held centrally and complete records are not available.

The information that we have, however, shows the following visits by officers of One Star status or above to Chile:

Year	Number of visits
1990	1
1991	1
1992	5
1993	4
1994	3
1995	6
1996	2
1997	3
1998	4

In addition we are aware that students of the Royal College of Defence Studies, which is attended by some officers of one star status and above, visited Chile in 1990, 1992, 1994, 1995, 1996 and in 1998. We do not, however, have details of the number of officers concerned.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence which chiefs of staff of the British armed forces visited Chile from 1990 to date indicating the dates of the visit in each case. [64014]

Mr. George Robertson: The information requested is not held centrally and complete records are not available. The information that we hold, however, shows the following visits to Chile:

Date	Visit
1990	Chief of the Naval Staff
March 1994	Chief of the Air Staff
March 1995	Chief of the Naval Staff
March 1996	Vice Chief of the Defence Staff
June 1998	Chief of the Naval Staff
October 1998	Chief of the Air Staff

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many vessels of the Royal Navy, including ships of the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, visited Chilean ports and naval bases during each calendar year since 1990. [64015]

Mr. George Robertson: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *331*, to the hon. Member for Worthing, East and Shoreham (Mr. Loughton). The following visits were also made by the Royal Navy from 1990 to 1993:

Royal Navy vessels	Dates
1990	
HMS Otter	9 June-14 June
1991	
HMS Alacrity	29 August-2 September
HMS Endurance (Old)	11 April-16 April
HMS Cumberland	25 February-4 March
1992	
HMS Ambuscade	9 October-12 October
HMS Campbeltown	29 July-3 August
HMS Endurance	1 April-6 April
1993	
HMS Newcastle	18 November-22 November
HMS Endurance	8 April-13 April
HMS Endurance	18 February-22 February

Note:
Records of RFA deployments for the period prior to December 1993 are not sufficiently detailed to show individual visits

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimates he has made of *(a)* the total cost of transfer of equipment and *(b)* the cost of transferring IT equipment, in the move of 101 Battalion REME from Chorley Barracks to Queensferry. [63652]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* I refer my hon. Friend to the answer I gave him on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *54*.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what criteria he used to select Chorley TA for closure in the review of the Territorial Army. [63617]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The planning assumptions underlying the restructuring of the Territorial Army were well publicised during the consultative process. A copy of the assumptions has been placed in the Library of the House. The particular factors bearing on the decision to close Chorley TA Centre were explained by my hon. Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary to the hon. Members in the House on 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 859–64.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment he has made of the effect on travelling costs of the transfer of 101 Battalion REME from Chorley Barracks to Queensferry. [63623]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The effect on travelling costs will depend on whether individuals are transferred from the headquarters at Chorley to that at Queensferry, when the Battalion transfers, which has yet to be determined.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many TA centres will remain open *(a)* in South Lancashire and *(b)* in the parliamentary constituencies of (i) Chorley, (ii) South Ribble, (iii) West Lancashire, (iv) Rossendale and Darwen and (v) Ribble Valley. [63618]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* There are two TA centres in South Lancashire; both are located in Blackburn and will remain open.

Chorley is the only constituency among those listed which has a TA centre; this is scheduled for closure.

Ammunition

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement about the Army's requirement for ammunition. [64277]

Mr. Spellar: I am pleased to announce the outcome of two recent ammunition competitions. First, we intend to contract with Royal Ordnance to meet most of the British Army's requirement for large calibre ammunition for the next five years. The contract will cover ammunition for

use with the AS90 155mm self-propelled gun, Challenger 2 tank, and a range of reconnaissance and infantry fighting vehicles.

Secondly, we intend to contract with Marconi Marine Land and Naval Systems, formerly Vickers Shipbuilding and Engineering Ltd., to develop and produce enhancements to extend the range and increase the effectiveness of the AS90 self-propelled gun. Within this contract, Royal Ordnance will be sub-contracted to manufacture new barrels, and a South African company, Somchem, will manufacture a new Modular Charge System.

These contracts, which are subject to the completion of final negotiations, are together worth around £200 million and will bring valuable work to both Marconi and Royal Ordnance, securing over 500 jobs for British industry.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Recycled Paper

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee what steps have been taken to recycle paper from hon. Members' offices. [63996]

Mrs. Roe: All waste paper from honourable Members' offices is sorted and recycled by an approved contractor.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Millennium Experience

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what discussions he has had with *(a)* the New Millennium Experience Company, *(b)* London Underground and *(c)* the Department for Culture, Media and Sport about travel and entry ticket packages for visitors to the Dome; [62775]

(2) what representations he has received from the tourist industry about the timing of the announcement of travel and entry ticket packages for visitors to the Dome. [62776]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* Responsibility for negotiating travel and ticket arrangements with transport providers and tour operators rests with the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC). I have had no discussions with representatives from individual transport providers or the tourist industry. The NMEC are in discussion with both about combined travel and Millennium Experience entry packages. The aim is to ensure that attractive and competitive packages are available within the United Kingdom and abroad. Announcements about these packages will be made at the appropriate time. Officials from the Department for Culture, Media and Sport provide me with advice in my capacity as shareholder of the NMEC and they keep me advised of NMEC's progress in these matters.

Management Practices

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the Institute of Personnel Development: Study No. 22, Impact of People Management Practices on Business Performance; and if he will make a statement. [64107]

Mr. Mandelson: The need to improve the skills of the British work force is well-recognised and this forms a key theme of the Competitiveness White Paper which I am to publish shortly. This report is the first substantive piece of British research on how people management practices impact upon business performance in manufacturing industries. I welcome the report's findings that recent business performance was better where firms encouraged acquisition and development of employee skills, and where workers had more job autonomy—either individually or in teams.

My Department has jointly funded the 1998 Workplace Employee Relations Survey (WERS). Data from this will be used to do a similar type of analysis but it will be for a nationally representative set of British workplaces with 10 or more employees.

Foresight Programme

Mrs. Butler: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for the development of the Government's Foresight Programme. [64270]

Mr. Battle: I am delighted to publish today the blueprint for the next round of Foresight which will start in April 1999. Copies have been filed in the Library of the House.

The next round of Foresight will have a broader focus than before. The work will be taken forward through ten sectoral panels and three thematic panels looking at the aging population, crime prevention and the future of manufacturing. Associate Programmes will be run by professional institutions and other organisations, working closely with the Office of Science and Technology.

There will be many avenues for participation, with a particular emphasis on involving young people. An Internet-based Knowledge Pool will provide a unique resource to support Foresight participants and promote widespread debate on emerging results and conclusions.

The Government's vision is to put the future on Britain's side. We have the talent to exploit the opportunities of the future. The forthcoming Competitiveness White Paper will set out a framework for the Government's role in helping British business to achieve this. Foresight is a central part of that framework.

GEC

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what is the total value of grants paid by his Department to GEC since 1 May 1997. [61988]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* Between 1 May 1997 and 30 November 1998 my Department paid a total of some £1.8 million in grants to GEC companies. This includes grants paid under the Civil Aircraft Research and Technology Demonstration Programme (CARAD).

British Aerospace

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what has been the total value of grant paid by his Department to British Aerospace since 1 May 1997. [61990]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* My Department has paid a total of around £4.5 million in grant on various schemes to British Aerospace since 1 May 1997. This was mainly under the Civil Aircraft Research and Technology Demonstration Programme (CARAD).

In addition, the Government agreed on 2 February 1998 to invest up to £123 million in a public-private partnership with British Aerospace on the development of the Airbus A340–500/600.

Sellafield

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many shipments of mixed oxide fuel were made between 1 January and 30 November from Sellafield *(a)* by air and *(b)* by sea. [63438]

Mr. Battle: I understand that there was one shipment of Mixed Oxide fuel by air and one by sea from Sellafield between 1 January and 30 November.

Millennium Coin

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to issue to each school child in the United Kingdom a commemorative coin to mark the millennium. [62968]

Mr. Mandelson: The Royal Mint is planning to issue a commemorative coin to mark the millennium, which will be widely available.

Microchips (Radiation)

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what evaluation his Department is carrying out into the potential damage to transistors in microchips from background alpha and neutron radiation, following the recent report to the International Test Conference in Washington; and if he will make a statement. [62967]

Mr. Battle: The issue of potential damage to transistors from background radiation is primarily a matter for those companies and organisations that design and manufacture microchips. My Department continues to monitor developments.

Academy of Invention

Dr. Kumar: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what proposals he has evaluated for setting up an Academy of Invention; and if he will make a statement. [63850]

Mr. Battle: The Government fully recognise the need to harness better the depth of creativity which we have in the UK. Earlier this year the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, with the full support of my own Department, set up the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts (NESTA), with an endowment of £200 million from the National Lottery, to support talented individuals. NESTA's trustees will soon be consulting on their policies and programmes, which should start next year.

I have had useful discussion with proponents of an Academy of Invention, and other organisations which support invention. They are fully aware that any further public support for inventors must be consistent with and add value to NESTA's operation.

Minimum Wage (Ministers of Religion)

Mr. Lansley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if ministers of religion are persons qualifying for the national minimum wage. [63709]

Mr. Ian McCartney: As office holders ministers of religion will not be covered by the national minimum wage. However, those who do work under a worker's contract will be covered.

Internal Market Council

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the outcome of the Internal Market Council held in Brussels on 7 December 1998; and if he will make a statement. [63166]

Mr. Mandelson: My noble Friend the Minister for Trade and Competitiveness in Europe represented the UK at the Internal Market Council in Brussels on 7 December.

The Council discussed the draft directive on late payments, which would give companies across the EU a statutory right to interest on late payments, and a proposal for a multiannual programme to assist European tourism. The Presidency concluded that it had not been possible to reach political agreement on either proposal and that discussion would continue under the German Presidency.

The Presidency presented a report on taking forward the process of European economic reform agreed at the Cardiff Summit in June 1998. This will enable the Internal Market Council on 25 February to make a contribution to ECOFIN preparation of the Broad Economic Guidelines and help inform its own future single market work programme.

The Commission presented reports on the interim Single Market Scoreboard, which showed good progress in transposition of internal market directives, particularly in the UK, Luxembourg, Ireland and Spain; chemicals legislation; and a proposal for a directive to facilitate the development of an internal market in electronic commerce.

The Council reached unanimous political agreement on the extension of the 1985 Product Liability Directive to primary agricultural products and game; and on the Fourth Motor Insurance Directive, which will make it easier for victims of road accidents that take place in another member state to make an insurance claim. The Free Movement of Goods Regulation and Resolution were adopted, with the UK Presidency mentioned as the driving force behind the agreement.

Domestic Metering

Mr. Ruane: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will make a statement on *(a)* the use of 2 in 1 metering by Swalec and Welsh Water and

(b) the Director General of Electricity Supply's view that Swalec should take all reasonable steps to discontinue use of these meters; [62272]

(2) how many homes in each United Kingdom region have 2 in 1 meters; and if he will make a statement. [62273]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* The 2 in 1 metering scheme is a trial one being run by the Hyder Group (Swalec and Welsh Water). I understand that it is currently confined to 3,000 customers who join the scheme on a voluntary basis. Swalec have issued proceedings seeking a judicial direction that their scheme is lawful, not contrary to the Electricity Act 1989 and that the Director General of Electricity Supply has no powers to issue enforcement proceedings under the Act. It would not be appropriate for me to comment further while this process is under way.

British Nuclear Fuels Limited

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects to publish the KPMG report on BNFL. [63494]

Mr. Battle: The KPMG report has not yet been received. An announcement will be made once Ministers have considered the report.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the offices or agencies under his control which will be subject to L.2 of Head L in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998; how many people are currently employed in these offices; and what equal opportunities practices are adopted in these offices. [63797]

Mr. Mandelson: The Department has a total of 132 staff in the following offices in Scotland which will be subject to L.2 of Head L in Schedule 5 to the Scotland Act 1998:

Oil and Gas Directorate

Infrastructure and Energy Projects Directorate

Redundancy Payments Office.

Its Executive Agencies and ACAS have the following numbers of staff:

	Number
Companies House	43
Employment Tribunal Service	50
Insolvency Service	6
Radiocommunications Agency	12
ACAS	57

All staff in these offices are covered by the DTI Equal Opportunities Policy or the relevant equal opportunities for their Executive Agency or ACAS. The Order designating cross-border public authorities is still under discussion. Therefore, information on the authorities, and their employees, which will be affected by the Order cannot yet be provided.

Tobacco

Ms Osborne: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he proposes to take to further the adoption of global standards on tobacco marketing. [64125]

Ms Jowell: I have been asked to reply.

We will fully co-operate in the planning, scheduling and information-sharing that would accompany the development of an international framework convention for tobacco control, intended to facilitate and encourage member states to strengthen their own national tobacco control policies. We will liaise with relevant organisations in taking this forward. The White Paper 'Smoking Kills' signalled our willingness to co-operate and we hope it will provide a model in the development and operation of a framework convention.

PRIME MINISTER

Duty Free

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister if he will estimate the numbers of duty free cigarettes per month brought into the United Kingdom by EU travellers in the past year. [64097]

The Prime Minister: HM Customs and Excise have no published estimate of the number of duty free cigarettes brought into the UK by EU travellers.

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Prime Minister (1) when he took the decision to support a continuation of EU duty free purchases of cigarettes for travellers; [64096]

(2) if he will make it his policy to oppose the continuation of duty free personal imports of cigarettes. [64101]

The Prime Minister: At the recent European Council meeting in Vienna a number of Member States, including the UK, asked the Commission and the Council of Finance Ministers (ECOFIN) to examine, by March 1999, the problems which could arise with regard to employment and to address, on the basis of proposals from the Commission, possible means of tackling these problems, including the possibility of a limited extension to duty free shopping. Any proposal to extend duty free shopping beyond 30 June 1999 would still be subject to unanimity in Council.

Mr. Gale: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his answer of 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *219*, what case for looking again at the 1991 decision to abolish duty-free sales within the European Union at the end of June 1999 is available now that was not available at the time of his written answer of 19 May 1998, *Official Report*, column *315*, his oral answer of 20 May 1998, *Official Report*, column 952, his written answer of 3 June 1998, *Official Report*, column *215*, or during the last United Kingdom Presidency of the European Union. [63948]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the oral reply I gave him in the House on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 618.

South Africa

Mr. Evans: To ask the Prime Minister what arrangements he has made to visit South Africa in 1999; if he will list those who will accompany him and their travel arrangements; and what estimate he has made of the cost of the visit. [63678]

The Prime Minister: Details for my visit are still being finalised.

RAF Planes

Mr. Evans: To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to use RAF planes between 17 December 1998 and 11 January 1999; and if he will list those who will accompany him and the estimated cost of the journeys. [63677]

The Prime Minister: I have no plans to use RAF planes between 17 December 1998 and 11 January 1999.

Pressure Groups

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister if he will amend the Ministerial Code to provide guidance to Ministers on how to respond to questions about past affiliations to pressure groups. [64088]

The Prime Minister: No. The Ministerial Code already provides guidance on the handling of private interests, including membership and/or support to pressure groups. Guidance is also provided on the declaration of Ministers' private interests if these might conflict, or be thought to conflict, with their Ministerial duties.

Departmental Staff

Dr. Julian Lewis: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list, by Department, all special advisers, together with their salaries. [63912]

The Prime Minister: For details of the Special Advisers employed in my office I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr. Jackson) on 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *143*.

At 14 December, my Ministerial colleagues had appointed the following Special Advisers.

Appointing Minister	*Name of appointee*
Chief Whip	Ian McKenzie
Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food	Sue Jackson
	Tom Greatrex
Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport	Kieran Simpson
	John Newbiggin
Secretary of State for Defence	Andy Burnham
	Bernard Gray
Secretary of State for Education and Employment	Alasdair McGowan
	Conor Ryan
	Hillary Benn
	Tom Bentley—part time
	Sophie Linden—part time
Deputy Prime Minister and Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions	Joe Irvin
	Paul Hackett—part time
	Joan Hammell
	Darren Murphy—part time
	Richard Olszewski
Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs	David Clark
	Andrew Hood
Secretary of State for Health	Joe McCrea
	Simon Stevens
Secretary of State for the Home Department	Ed Owen
	Justin Russell
Lord Chancellor	Gary Hart
Secretary of State for International Development	David Mepham
	Dee Sullivan
Leader of the House of Lords and Minister for Women	Clare Cozens
	Jo Gibbons
Secretary of State for Northern Ireland	Nigel Warner
	Andrew Lappin
Minister for the Cabinet Office	Tim Walker
	Anna Healey
President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons	Sheila Watson
	Nicci Russell
Secretary of State for Scotland	Wendy Alexander
	Murray Elder
	David Whitton
Secretary of State for Social Security	Andrew Maugham
Secretary of State for Trade and Industry	Dan Corry
	Ben Wegg Prosser
Chancellor of the Exchequer	Ed Balls
	Charles Whelan
Chief Secretary	Ed Milliband
	Spencer Livermore
Secretary of State for Wales	Julia Crowley
	Gareth Williams

In addition, the Minister for the Cabinet Office has appointed Mr. Keith Hellawell as the UK Anti-Drugs Co-ordinator and Mr. Michael Trace as his Deputy. Professor Michael Barber has been appointed as the Standards and Effectiveness Adviser to the Secretary of State for Education and Employment. The Chancellor of the Exchequer has appointed Mr. Chris Wales and Mr. Paul Gregg as members of the Council of Economic Advisers. All are employed on Special Adviser terms.

For information on the salaries of Special Advisers, I refer the hon. Member to the answer my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Ms King) on 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *354–55*.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the official visits which he has made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997. [64131]

The Prime Minister: I visited the Chilton Cheshire Home at Gerrards Cross on 30 October 1997. In addition, some of my official duties are carried out at Chequers.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the countries of Latin America visited by members of Her Majesty's Government since 2 May 1997, stating the name of each Minister, the purpose of each visit and the duration of each stay. [64020]

The Prime Minister: There have been 29 Ministerial visits to 12 different countries in Latin America since 2 May to strengthen bilateral relations, promote British interests and continue to play our leading role in international affairs. All visits have been made in accordance with the Ministerial Code.

Local Government Cabinet Sub-Committee

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Prime Minister if he has appointed Councillor Jeremy Beecham to the Cabinet Sub-Committee on Local Government. [64089]

The Prime Minister: No. However, my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Cabinet Office, who is Chairman of the Ministerial Group on Better Government, has invited Councillor Sir Jeremy Beecham to attend relevant meetings of the Group in order to bring a local government perspective to discussion of ways of improving service delivery in the public sector.

President of the Council

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Prime Minister what ministerial support is provided to the President of the Council. [64274]

The Prime Minister: Her Majesty, the Queen, has been pleased to approve that my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) be appointed Parliamentary Secretary, Privy Council Office.

My hon. Friend will provide support to my right hon. Friend the President of the Council and Leader of the House of Commons, in a number of areas for which she is responsible. The President's responsibilities were set out in the answer given by my right hon. Friend to my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr. Casale) on 2 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *363*.

My hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood will not draw a Ministerial salary.

Queen's Awards

Mr. Gapes: To ask the Prime Minister what plans there are to carry out a review of the Queen's Awards for Export, Technological and Environmental Achievement. [64275]

The Prime Minister: The Queen's Awards are made by Her Majesty The Queen on my recommendation. At Buckingham Palace's suggestion it has been agreed that now would be an appropriate time for a further review of the scheme, to ensure that it is up to date and provides the best possible incentive for British business. The Review Committee will be set up shortly. The Committee will consider all aspects of the Awards, including their scope and eligibility. The membership of the Review Committee will be made in time for any resulting changes to be implemented for the Awards in the year 2000.

Those wishing to express views on the operation of the Awards or to suggest changes are invited to submit their views to the Secretary, Queen's Awards Review, Room 188, 151 Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 9SS by no later than the end of January 1999. Views may also be submitted by e-mail to queens-awards-review@lond05.dti.gov.uk. or from the Secretary, Queen's Awards Review, telephone number 0171–215 3772.

MI5-MI6

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister if he will publish the report by the National Audit Office into the construction of new headquarters for MI5 and MI6. [63853]

The Prime Minister: No. The reports on the purchase and fitting out of Vauxhall Cross and Thames House contain sensitive information. It is established practice under Section 1(a) of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information not to disclose information where disclosure would harm national security or defence.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the contents of the National Audit Office report on the construction of the new MI6 building. [63854]

The Prime Minister: I am aware of the report which the Comptroller and Auditor General made to the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee in 1992 on the purchase of Vauxhall Cross. The report was dealt with in accordance with the agreed procedure set out in the House by the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee in 1987 on 27 January 1987, *Official Report*, columns 246–49.

European Union

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Prime Minister further to his reply of 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *371*, if he will make a statement on what types of outside organisations Her Majesty's Government classes as relevant for inclusion in lists of recommended sources for further contact in official documents; and if he will consent to the listing of organisations opposed to closer European Union on Government-funded publications. [64109]

The Prime Minister: There are no set criteria concerning contact lists in UK Government publications about the European Union. The Government are keen to

ensure that members of the public are given access to all relevant information. They do not list publications by political parties in source material, but would seek to include academic institutions. These may well have differing views on the development of the European Union.

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Stone (Mr. Cash) of 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 874, on the constitutional position of the United Kingdom in relation to the EU, if he will list the essential interests to which he referred. [64017]

The Prime Minister: Our essential interests are to maintain and enhance the security and prosperity of the UK, and to improve the quality of life of its citizens. We seek to protect and promote these interests through membership of the European Union.

Age Discrimination

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Grantham and Stamford (Mr. Davies) of 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 879, on age discrimination, what action the Government have taken to tackle age discrimination; and when he plans to introduce legislation on this matter. [64019]

The Prime Minister: The Government stand by their manifesto commitment that in work older people should not be discriminated against because of their age.

On 16 November, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Employment, Welfare to Work and Equal Opportunities launched a consultation on the draft Code of Practice for Age Diversity in Employment. A final version of the code will be published early next year.

The draft Code of Practice builds on the results of the year long consultation on age discrimination set out in the report 'Action on Age' published in August. This pointed to the immediate impact a Code of Practice would have in tackling unfair age discrimination in employment. Proposals for the Code were widely welcomed by employers and individuals alike.

Given this Government's busy legislative programme, the Code of Practice is an effective measure that will challenge employment practices that unfairly discriminate against employees on the grounds of age. The impact of the Code will be evaluated and this will inform future plans for legislation in this area.

The Code of Practice is one of many strands in the Government's approach to helping older people enjoy an active life, participating fully in work and more widely. On 23 November "Building a Better Britain for Older People" was published, setting out the Government's wide strategy for supporting older people.

Beef Export Ban

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs. May) of 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 880, on the ban on beef exports, when agreement was reached that the export ban be entirely lifted. [64018]

The Prime Minister: On 25 November the European Commission adopted a Commission Decision which permits the resumption of exports of deboned beef produced under the Date-Based Export Scheme.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer to the right hon. Member for Yeovil (Mr. Ashdown) of 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 877, on waiting lists, what has been the rise in the number of general practitioner referrals over the last six months; and from what source these figures have been derived. [64011]

The Prime Minister: General practitioner referrals for an outpatient appointment rose by 31,000 in the first six months of 1998–99, compared to the first six months of 1997–98. Referrals from all sources (including general practitioners, accident and emergency departments, other consultants and other healthcare professionals) rose by 97,000 during the same period.

These figures are derived from the quarterly returns from National Health Service trusts.

Rover Group

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Prime Minister, pursuant to his oral answer to the hon. Member for Birmingham, Northfield (Mr. Burden), of 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 874, on the Rover Group, if he will make a statement on the Government's plans to assist Rover. [64012]

The Prime Minister: The Government continue to be in close contact with Rover and BMW over future investment plans for Longbridge. The decision by Rover employees to implement the new working-time arrangements and the decision to make the new mini at Longbridge are very important milestones in helping to secure further investment for the plant.

We will maintain our close contact and support to both companies. However, the Government have not been asked for financial assistance. Should such an approach be received, it will be considered on its own merits and within the usual rules for providing financial assistance to companies.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police (Firearms)

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will publish statistics on the police use of firearms for the latest period for which such statistics are available. [62268]

Mr. Boateng: The statistics for April 1997 to March 1998 show that the number of police operations in which firearms were issued to officers was 11,842, a fall of over 4 per cent. on the previous year. The number of occasions on which firearms were discharged by police fell to just three, from five the previous year, resulting in two fatalities.

There was a decrease of 7 per cent. to 7,510 in the number of operations in which armed response vehicles were deployed. Firearms were carried in these vehicles, but were not necessarily issued to offers on each occasion.

Full details are set out in the tables.

	Number of operations in which firearms were issued			
	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Total	6,141	8,726	12,379	11,842
Avon and Somerset	156	326	312	139
Bedfordshire	36	264	345	323
Cambridgeshire	73	47	54	96
Cheshire	93	219	288	216
Cleveland	107	487	1,026	103
City of London	325	275	308	307
Cumbria	44	54	72	68
Derbyshire	68	72	109	147
Devon and Cornwall	29	90	160	133
Dorset	46	36	36	54
Durham	100	111	131	103
Essex	267	267	331	505
Gloucestershire	27	33	41	51
Greater Manchester	110	142	214	165
Hampshire	195	190	245	217
Hertfordshire	69	47	96	82
Humberside	49	92	291	472
Kent	95	82	236	423
Lancashire	57	227	333	338
Leicestershire	78	138	155	89
Lincolnshire	50	25	58	52
Merseyside	116	280	671	675
Metropolitan	1,804	2,178	2,439	2,578
Norfolk	56	96	166	128
Northamptonshire	40	54	64	77
Northumbria	593	452	1,360	823
North Yorkshire	25	52	65	102
Nottinghamshire	47	57	84	306
South Yorkshire	172	225	155	302
Staffordshire	21	80	257	240
Suffolk	119	150	180	193
Surrey	60	70	133	87
Sussex	375	445	235	330
Thames Valley	65	96	215	227
Warwickshire	25	55	97	152
West Mercia	50	59	106	132
West Midlands	141	226	270	227
West Yorkshire	181	657	617	630
Wiltshire	26	26	26	26
Dyfed Powys	16	11	17	27
Gwent	20	47	89	86
North Wales	60	117	233	310
South Wales	55	69	59	101

	Number of Authorised Firearms Officers (AFOs)			
	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Total	6,837	6,554	6,738	6,137
Avon and Somerset	156	157	165	161
Bedfordshire	67	48	46	42
Cambridgeshire	87	92	90	80
Cheshire	122	84	70	82
Cleveland	55	65	86	84
City of London	146	120	88	81
Cumbria	105	100	108	122
Derbyshire	140	130	110	100
Devon and Cornwall	116	140	151	147
Dorset	76	75	74	72
Durham	108	103	138	144
Essex	209	203	228	217

	Number of Authorised Firearms Officers (AFOs)			
	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Gloucestershire	71	85	82	84
Greater Manchester	181	186	209	182
Hampshire	110	104	106	112
Hertfordshire	48	43	42	41
Humberside	110	104	90	102
Kent	147	144	150	150
Lancashire	135	138	132	125
Leicestershire	103	105	104	94
Lincolnshire	73	81	82	85
Merseyside	160	119	147	165
Metropolitan	2,013	1,915	2,035	1,523
Norfolk	117	99	98	102
Northamptonshire	83	95	92	92
Northumbria	166	160	173	126
North Yorkshire	142	134	108	95
Nottinghamshire	125	126	128	129
South Yorkshire	162	125	110	108
Staffordshire	84	80	78	86
Suffolk	65	70	82	96
Surrey	76	79	76	61
Sussex	142	149	180	146
Thames Valley	180	175	185	194
Warwickshire	56	50	41	38
West Mercia	160	153	155	159
West Midlands	87	87	88	95
West Yorkshire	156	150	131	114
Wiltshire	165	145	134	105
Dyfed Powys	58	57	70	71
Gwent	54	55	70	59
North Wales	71	70	72	90
South Wales	150	154	134	176

	Number of operations involving Armed Response Vehicles (ARVs)			
	1994–95	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*
Total	2,423	5,523	8,060	7,510
Avon and Somerset	90	200	247	121
Bedfordshire	0	239	309	285
Cambridgeshire	27	15	23	19
Cheshire	76	180	240	166
Cleveland	89	465	1,014	[1]57
City of London	0	23	25	0
Cumbria	19	44	64	43
Derbyshire	58	53	97	99
Devon and Cornwall	0	21	77	58
Dorset	25	22	28	50
Durham	27	38	62	85
Essex	165	155	218	180
Gloucestershire	0	10	13	48
Greater Manchester	69	6	[2]—	56
Hampshire	156	159	208	170
Hertfordshire	37	20	35	25
Humberside	6	35	284	437
Kent	47	42	208	212
Lancashire	48	187	320	321
Leicestershire	50	101	126	68
Lincolnshire	45	21	39	34
Merseyside	73	239	618	559
Metropolitan	[3]—	1,025	790	954
Norfolk	36	80	152	117
Northamptonshire	21	3	20	29
Northumbria	310	325	715	515
North Yorkshire	0	0	13	52
Nottinghamshire	40	44	66	[1]256
South Yorkshire	140	171	129	252
Staffordshire	3	70	235	206
Suffolk	113	117	120	135
Surrey	25	47	52	76
Sussex	304	413	173	284

	Number of operations involving Armed Response Vehicles (ARVs)			
	1994–95	1995–96	1996–97	1997–98
Thames Valley	6	73	164	184
Warwickshire	22	54	91	127
West Mercia	26	39	77	98
West Midlands	58	98	103	102
West Yorkshire	173	587	584	586
Wiltshire	13	1	23	21
Dyfed Powys	9	6	12	19
Gwent	9	39	58	47
North Wales	0	14	173	260
South Wales	8	42	55	97

[1] These forces have amended their arrangements for counting ARV deployment to incidents

[2] No figures available

[3] Not known

Stephen Lawrence Inquiry

Mr. Efford: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to receive a copy of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry report. [64269]

Mr. Straw: I expect to receive the report of the Inquiry in late January or early February 1999.

Refugees and Asylum Seekers (Sussex)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will estimate the number of *(a)* refugees and *(b)* asylum seekers currently residing in the areas administered by (i) East Sussex County Council, (ii) Eastbourne Borough Council and (iii) Wealden District Council; [63231]

(2) how many asylum seekers or refugees are currently residing in council or housing association accommodation in Eastbourne Borough; [63232]

(3) how many asylum seekers or refugees are currently living in emergency accommodation within the Eastbourne Borough. [63234]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This information is not available to the Home Office and the hon. Member should approach the local authority.

Asylum seekers and refugees who are able to support themselves are currently free to live within the United Kingdom in a place of their own choosing. Asylum seekers who register their application for asylum at their port of entry may be eligible for Income Support and Housing Benefit and can then find their own accommodation. Refugees may also qualify for such benefits and are in a similar position. Asylum seekers who do not qualify for benefits, but who may be supported under the terms of the National Assistance Act 1948, or the Children Act 1989 are supported by local authorities under the terms of that legislation. The Home Office currently has no role in providing support and is consequently not aware of the information sought. The Government plan a fundamental reform of the asylum and immigration laws to remove cash benefits and more strictly control where asylum seekers live.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people currently residing in Eastbourne have applied for asylum in the United Kingdom. [63233]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I regret that reliable information on the number of people residing in Eastbourne who have applied for asylum in the United Kingdom could be obtained only by examination of individual case records and is, therefore, available only at disproportionate cost.

Charity Commissioners

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if he will list the Charity Commissioners, indicating the term of office of each; [63552]

(2) to whom the Charity Commissioners are accountable; and what plans he has to reform their lines of accountability. [63553]

Mr. Boateng: In accordance with Schedule 1 of the Charities Act 1993, the Home Secretary is responsible for the appointment of the Charity Commissioners. There are a maximum of five Charity Commissioners: the Chief Charity Commissioner is Head of the Department and Accounting Officer; there is a full-time Legal Commissioner; and three part-time Commissioners, one of whom must be legally qualified.

The Chief Charity Commissioner is Richard Fries, who was appointed on 1 June 1992 for a period of five years. This appointment was extended until 1 June 1999 with effect from 1 June 1997. The full-time Legal Commissioner is Michael Carpenter, appointed on 1 January 1998 until 7 October 2002. The part-time Commissioners are John Bonds, appointed on 1 January 1995 until 31 December 1997, extended to 31 December 1999; Jean Warburton (the other Legal Commissioner), appointed on 1 October 1996 until 30 September 2001; and Julia Unwin appointed from 1 May 1998 until 30 April 2001.

Whilst the Home Secretary is accountable to Parliament for the efficiency of the Charity Commission, his powers do not extend to investigating the Commission's decisions in particular cases. The Commission is a non-ministerial Government Department, accountable to the courts for its legal decisions. In exercising its powers under charity law, it functions in a quasi-judicial way and is not subject to Ministerial direction. In these matters it acts as an extension of the High Court and its decisions are subject to appeal to the courts. There are no plans to reform their lines of accountability.

South East London Probation Service

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how much will be spent by the South East London Probation Service pilot for treatment and testing orders with regards to *(a)* Probation Service administration, *(b)* Probation Service officer posts, *(c)* research and *(d)* providers of treatment and rehabilitation. [63704]

Mr. George Howarth: South East London Probation Service spending over the entire drug treatment and testing order pilot period (1 October 1998—31 March 2000) will be as follows:

Probation Service	£
(a) probation service administration:	[1]95,238
(b) probation officer and administrative staff posts:	96,299
(c) research:	24,000
(d) treatment and rehabilitation:	368,127
Total	583,664

[1] Includes start-up costs, travel and subsistence, training rent and services, and contingency costs.

Prisons

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many Prison Service establishments he or his Ministers plan to visit between 17 December 1998 and 11 January 1999. [63396]

Mr. George Howarth: I expect to visit Hindley Prison on 7 January. No other visits are scheduled during this period.

Car Crime

Mrs. Heal: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what initiatives his Department are developing to reduce car crime. [63403]

Mr. Boateng: On 29 September my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced a national target of a 30 per cent. reduction in vehicle crime over the next five years. To achieve this, we have recently established a ministerial task force—the Vehicle Crime Reduction Action Team—which will use as a starting point, a 14 point action plan developed jointly by the former Vehicle Crime Prevention Group and the Association of Chief Police Officers.

Identification Procedures

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to introduce video ID evidence as an alternative to the current identification procedure. [63610]

Mr. Boateng: In response to the report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology about Digital Images as Evidence, published in February of this year, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary established a Working Group to take forward the recommendations in the report to consider other issues relating to the impact of technology on the laws of evidence, including the issue of video identification evidence.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the total cost of identity parades in each year since 1993–94; and if he will make a statement. [63611]

Mr. Boateng: Decisions to hold identification parades are operational matters for the police. Details of the numbers held and the cost of each, which will vary, are not collected centrally.

Explosives

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to review the regulations governing the use of *(a)* black gunpowder and *(b)* other explosives by historic re-enactment societies; and if he will make a statement. [63609]

Mr. Boateng: The Health and Safety Executive keeps the regulations under review. The Executive has recently published guidance on the safe use of gunpowder and other explosives by historical re-enactment societies. The intention of the guidance is to ensure that members of these societies are aware of the relevant legislation, and good safety practice for the protection of themselves and members of the public. A copy of the guidance has been placed in the Library. The publication of such guidance is a regular part of Health and Safety Executive work to promote health and safety. I welcome and support the Executive's initiative publishing this guidance.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62801]

Mr. Straw: The information is available in the Library.

Police Funding

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on progress in introducing a sparsity factor into the budgets for rural police authorities. [63687]

Mr. Boateng: The formula which distributes resources between police authorities in England and Wales already contains an element for rural sparsity. This year, 0.5 per cent. of available resources have been allocated on the basis of population sparsity. This element has been retained in our proposals for 1999–2000 which my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced on 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *194–97*.

We have commissioned external consultants to find out whether there are additional costs involved in policing sparsely populated rural areas. We are expecting their report shortly. The results of this study will be available to inform funding settlements from 2000–2001.

Council Cases Review Commission

Mr. Mullin: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to amend the Criminal Appeal Act 1995 to ensure that the Criminal Cases Review Commission can deal with cases where a person is found not guilty by reason of insanity; and if he will make a statement. [63106]

Kate Hoey: The Government accept that the Criminal Appeal Act 1995 should be amended to enable the Criminal Cases Review Commission to refer to the Court of Appeal a special verdict of 'guilty but insane', under section 2(1) of the Trial of Lunatics Act 1993; and to give

the Court of Appeal powers to hear and dispose of an appeal upon such a reference. Such a measure will be brought forward as soon as Parliamentary time allows.

HEALTH

Waiting Lists

12. **Mr. Bill O'Brien:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on current trends in NHS waiting lists *(a)* regionally and *(b)* nationally. [62454]

Mr. Dobson: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply that I gave earlier today, *Official Report*, column 759.

27. **Dr. Palmer:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what progress is being made in reducing waiting lists. [62470]

Mr. Milburn: The Government inherited the biggest and fastest-rising NHS waiting lists ever. Since April, the number of people waiting for hospital treatment has fallen by 119,000.

31. **Siobhain McDonagh:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients currently have been waiting over 18 months for hospital treatment; and what was the largest figure for those waiting over 18 months in the NHS in the period 1979 to 1997. [62474]

Mr. Milburn: There were no patients waiting over 18 months for hospital inpatient treatment at the end of October 1998.

Data on the number of patients waiting over 18 months for hospital treatment were not collected centrally until June 1992. At the end of June 1992 there were 20,559 patients waiting over 18 months for hospital treatment which is the highest recorded number.

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what proposals he has to reduce waiting times for operations in the NHS. [62463]

Mr. Milburn: The Government's successful drive to reduce the numbers of patients waiting for hospital admission is also reducing waiting times for patients, and latest figures show there were no patients waiting over 18 months for hospital treatment at the end of October.

Primary Care Groups

21. **Mr. Blizzard:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on progress in the establishment of primary care groups. [62464]

30. **Mr. Burden:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the development of primary care groups. [62473]

Mr. Milburn: We are well on target to establishing Primary Care Groups by 1 April 1999. There are now 481 shadow Primary Care Groups in place. The Autumn guidance, Health Service Circular 1998/228 and guidance on governance, Health Service Circular 1998/229 were published on 8 December. Copies are available in the Library. These are the latest in a rolling programme of guidance.

22. **Ms Oona King:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will relax the restrictions on health authorities in inner city areas in relation to the development of primary care premises. [62465]

Mr. Milburn: Since coming into Government, we have introduced a number of new flexibilities to support our aim of improving primary care premises. We will consider whether other flexibilities might be helpful and provide value for money in achieving this aim.

32. **Mr. Darvill:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement about the progress towards implementation of the nine specific recommendations on primary care set out in the strategic review of London health services conducted by the independent advisory panel chaired by Professor Sir Leslie Turnberg. [62475]

Mr. Milburn: The implementation of the recommendations in the Turnberg report, on primary care and on other matters, is being taken forward by the NHS Executive in conjunction with local National Health Service organisations. Good progress is being made. The new NHS Executive regional office for London will be established on 1 January 1999 as the strategic health body for London in response to the London review. The regional office will produce a report on implementation which will be published in the new year.

NHS Hospitals

24. **Mr. Tipping:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for encouraging co-operation between NHS hospitals. [62467]

Mr. Milburn: In the White Paper *The new NHS* we set out our plans to replace the internal market with a system based on partnership and driven by performance. National Health Service trusts, other NHS organisations and local authorities are already working more closely together to improve health and healthcare.

28. **Laura Moffatt:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has for encouraging management co-operation between NHS hospitals in order to reduce administration costs. [62471]

Mr. Milburn: *The new NHS* White Paper set out our plans to abolish the internal market and shift the focus from competition to co-operation across the National Health Service. NHS trusts, working with health authorities and Primary Care Groups, are being encouraged to share support functions to eliminate duplication and free up extra resources for direct patient care. This will ensure we focus NHS management effort on improving health and health care, by cutting unnecessary bureaucracy.

NHS Treatment

25. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health under what circumstances the age of a patient is the determining factor in the provision of NHS treatment. [62468]

Mr. Hutton: The fundamental principle of the National Health Service is to provide services for everybody on the basis of clinical need.

There are particular circumstances in which age may be one factor in determining the provision of NHS services. Immunisation programmes are targeted at certain age

groups, for example this year for the first time all people over 75 have been targeted for influenza vaccination. Screening services may also be targeted at particular age groups, for example breast screening is targeted at women between the ages of 50 and 64. As natural fertility declines with age, health authorities may operate eligibility criteria for specialised infertility treatment which may include age.

Mount Vernon Hospital Burns Unit

26. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many *(a)* letters and *(b)* other representations his Department has received against Hillingdon health authority's proposal to move the Burns, Plastic and Oral Maxillofacial Surgery Unit from Mount Vernon Hospital, Northwood. [62469]

Mr. Hutton: We have received approximately 1,082 letters.

All petitions sent to the Department were referred to Hillingdon Health Authority. it is understood that the Health Authority received over 80,000 signatures.

Meetings have also taken place between the Chairman of the North Thames Regional Office and local MPs.

Winter Pressures

29. **Mr. Miller:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to monitor co-operation between health and social services bodies in dealing with winter pressures. [62472]

Mr. Hutton: We are managing this winter in the normal way through regional offices supported by the Emergency Services Action Team. We have made it clear that health authorities should work closely with social services in managing winter pressures and announced a further £159 million on 9 November 1998, *Official Report,* column *33–46,* to support them in this.

NHS Staff

33. **Mr. Martlew:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what action he is taking to protect NHS staff in the event of inaccurate attacks on their professional integrity and performance. [62476]

Mr. Milburn: Complaints regarding the professional integrity and performance of National Health Service staff are dealt with through the official complaints procedure or through the regulatory bodies of the professions concerned.

GP Fundholding

34. **Mrs. Dean:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the effect on management costs of abolishing GP fundholding. [62477]

35. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what estimate he has made of the savings in administrative costs to be made from abolishing GP fundholding. [62478]

Mr. Dobson: The White Paper sets out a programme of action to sweep away the bureaucracy of the internal market. Over the lifetime of this parliament, £1 billion that would otherwise have been spent on bureaucracy will be released for patient care. Of this, savings of £20 million were made in 1997–98 by deferring the eighth wave of general practitioner fundholding, with a further saving of £25 million in GP fundholding costs to be made in 1998–99.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what consultations he has had with representatives of general practitioners about retaining fundholding after 31 March 1999. [63688]

Mr. Milburn: Consultations have taken place and continue to do so with organisations involved in, or affected by, general practitioner fundholding about all aspects of the Government's implementation of the new National Health Service.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if, in the event of the Bill to abolish fundholding not having received Royal Assent by 31 March 1999, GP fundholders will receive their fundholding budget for 1999–2000. [63684]

Mr. Milburn: We propose, subject to the outcome of consultations currently in hand, to lay regulations that will bring the existing general practitioner fundholding schemes to an end on 31 March 1999 and substitute a residual scheme.

NHS Resources

36. **Mr. Cohen:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will review the elements of the weighted capitation formula for the allocation of NHS resources to health authorities; and if he will make a statement. [62479]

Mr. Milburn: On 10 November 1998, we announced a wide ranging review of the weighted capitation formula used to inform allocations to health authorities and primary care groups.

Nurses (Recruitment)

37. **Mr. Fraser:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on how he intends to meet his target for nurse recruitment. [62480]

Mr. Milburn: We announced on 23 September 1998 a four-point recruitment and retention plan. The plan takes into account the need to increase the numbers of nursing and midwifery students in training, target staff who have left the profession to return, broaden career structures and improve the working lives of people working in the National Health Service.

Road Traffic Accidents (Costs)

38. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for Health what recent assessment he has made of the correlation between road traffic levels and health service costs. [62481]

Mr. Hutton: As part of the work which has been undertaken in association with the Road Traffic (NHS Charges) Bill, which is currently before the House, we have looked at the number of road traffic accidents which take place, their level of severity and the cost of treating those people injured in accidents. This information has informed the tariff of charges which will be applied under the terms of the Bill.

Care Standards

Mr. Derek Twigg: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what roles and responsibilities he proposes for regional commissions for care standards. [62447]

Mr. Hutton: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State gave earlier today.

Mental Health Services (Leeds)

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the provision of mental health services in the city of Leeds. [62466]

Mr. Hutton: I understand there have been concerns about mental health services in Leeds and I welcome the Leeds Health Authority's commitment to improve services through increased funding and the modernisation of facilities over the next few years.

Trainee General Practitioners

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the trend in the number of trainee general practitioners in the NHS over the past 12 months. [63339]

Mr. Milburn: Information about general practitioner Registrars (previously referred to as trainees) over the past 12 months is not available. Between October 1996 and October 1997, the number of GP Registrars in England increased by 2.9 per cent.

HIV/AIDS

Mr. Gerrard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) what steps he is taking to revise the current system of funding for NHS treatment and care services for HIV/AIDS; [63608]

(2) when he will announce the outcome of the Stocktake Group on spending on HIV/AIDS and the allocations to health authorities for treatment and care services for HIV/AIDS. [63607]

Ms Jowell: We set up the Stocktake Group last year to advise on a lasting formula for the distribution of the HIV/AIDS treatment and care budget. The group's recommendations are currently with Ministers and an announcement on their decision and on the allocations to health authorities of the HIV/AIDS treatment and care budget for the financial year 1999/2000 will be made in due course.

CS Sprays

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Health on how many occasions the Chief Medical Officer has compiled an assessment of, or report into, the safety of CS sprays since January 1993. [63779]

Ms Jowell: The Committee on Toxicity of Chemicals in Food, Consumer Products and the Environment (COT) is currently considering the health effects of CS spray when used as an incapacitant. A comprehensive review of the available data has been prepared by officials at the Department for this purpose. The COT will consider the subject further at their February 1999 meeting. Their conclusions will be made known publicly once agreed and a copy of the review will be placed in the Library at the same time.

Officials at the Department have previously reviewed the scientific data on CS gas and sprays but they have not produced any scientific papers or reports on the subject. A list of the published scientific literature which was fully reviewed has been placed previously in the Library.

Accident and Emergency Departments

Mr. Hesford: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many accident and emergency departments are planned to be refurbished during the coming financial year. [62655]

Mr. Hutton: We are investing £30 million from the National Health Service modernisation fund to upgrade around 50 accident and emergency departments in England next year.

Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority

Mr. Reed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will publish the Annual Report of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority. [64266]

Ms Jowell: The Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority has published its seventh Annual Report today. The Report has been laid before the House in accordance with the requirements of section 7(3) of the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990. Copies have been placed in the Library.

Sodium Valproate

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what representations he has received concerning the effects of prescribing sodium valproate to epileptics during pregnancy; and if he will make a statement. [63944]

Ms Jowell: We are not currently aware of any representations concerning the effects of prescribing sodium valproate to people with epilepsy during pregnancy. Risks to the foetus are recognised for anticonvulsant therapies and information about whether and how to use medicines in pregnant patients can be found in the authorised product information for health professionals and patients. Women taking antiepileptic drugs who may become pregnant should be informed of the possible consequences. Those who wish to become pregnant should be referred to an appropriate specialist for advice. Women who become pregnant should be counselled and offered antenatal screening. The risks of epileptic control need to be weighed against the risks to the foetus of these treatments.

Chemical Weapons Attack (Iraq)

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what work his Department has funded *(a)* to treat the victims of Halabja in northern Iraq following the chemical weapons attack by Iraqi military forces on the town in March 1998 and *(b)* to monitor the long-term effects of the chemical weapons on the residents of the town; and if he will make a statement. [63778]

Ms Jowell: The Department of Health has not provided any assistance to the people of Halabja since the chemical weapons attack in March 1988, as international assistance of this kind is channelled through the Department for International Development (DfID). My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for International Development

provided a written answer on DfID's efforts on 29 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *283* and this represents the current state of play.

National Foetal Anti-convulsant Syndrome Association

Sir Nicholas Lyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what support is given out of public funds to the National Foetal Anti-Convulsant Syndrome Association; and if he will make a statement. [63937]

Ms Jowell: The Department provides no funding at present. The Association recently applied for a grant under Section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968 and this is under consideration.

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

New Deal (League Tables)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will publish league tables of units of delivery for the New Deal in such a form as to enable a comparison to be made between the performance of the private sector, the Employment Service and other providers. [63273]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Yesterday I published performance tables for all units of delivery. The tables compare progress at local level of all those young people who entered the New Deal in April—the first month of full national operation—and in particular shows what proportion of those young people has moved into jobs. Copies will be placed in the Libraries.

Environmental Skills

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what progress has been made by the Sustainable Development Education Panel in identifying environmental key skills. [63443]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Earlier this year the Panel made two submissions to the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority identifying sustainable development skills at each of the key stages. The sustainable charity Forum For The Future is publishing position papers on the Panel's behalf, identifying sustainable development curriculums in higher education for design, business and teacher education.

I have placed copies of these document in the Library of the House. Later this month the Panel will make its first annual report to the Government. I will deposit this in the Library of the House when it is published.

Further Education

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what guidance he will give to further education colleges on the use of hardship funds. [63472]

Mr. Mudie: College hardship funds are provided by colleges themselves and their use is not subject to guidance by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State. In many cases hardship funds are paid alongside Further Education Access Funds. My right hon. Friend's guidance on the use of these Funds is that they should address financial barriers to the access and completion of training and encourage participation.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will review the range of assistance available to further education students out of access funds. [63471]

Mr. Mudie: My right hon. the Secretary of State has recently reviewed the assistance available to further education students from Access Funds and last month announced significant improvements in funding and an extension of scope to students aged 16 to 18 years old.

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he intends to publish his response to the representations received by his Department in respect of his consultation paper regarding accountability in the governance of further education colleges. [63469]

Mr. Mudie: My right hon. Friend published the Department's response to this consultation on 27 November. Copies have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to increase the average level of funding per unit at FE colleges in *(a)* 1999–2000 and *(b)* 2000–01; and if he will list the average level of funding unit values for each of the previous five years. [62090]

Mr. Mudie: Latest information for the financial years 1994–95 to 1998–99 gives the following cash figures for public funding per full-time equivalent student in further education:

£000

Financial years	
1994–95	3,040
1995–96	2,930
1996–97	2,920
1997–98 estimated	2,950
1998–99 planned	2,900

My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State has announced additional funding of £725 million for the Further Education sector over the next two years. In the first of these years, 1999–2000, the average level of funding per full-time equivalent student, including additional employer contributions but excluding the allocations for capital and the Further Education Standards Fund, will be subject to a 1 per cent. efficiency gain. This compares with an estimated average annual efficiency gain of over 3.5 per cent. for the period 1994–95 to 1998–99. An announcement on the position for 2000–2001 will be made next year.

New Deal (Winchester)

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal Gateway in the Winchester City Council area since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [63159]

Mr. Andrew Smith: It is not possible to provide separate figures for individual towns or council areas.

The latest Government Statistical Service figures for the Mid Hampshire Unit of Delivery, which covers Winchester, show that to the end of September 1998 *(a)* 206 young people had entered the Gateway and 41 have secured unsubsidised employment; *(b)* 17 had joined one of the four options. This breaks down to: 2 on the Employment option; 3 on the Voluntary Sector option; and 12 on the Full-Time Education and Training option.

EU (Educational Material)

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many requests his Department received prior to the United Kingdom presidency of the European Union, to update material available on the EU; and if he will make a statement. [64092]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given by the Under-Secretary of State with responsibility for lifelong learning, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, East (Mr. Mudie), on 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *639–40*.

Sex Offenders

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment in how many cases convicted sex offenders have been offered placements working with children under the New Deal programme; and when he was informed of such cases. [63886]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* I am not aware of any cases of convicted sex offenders being offered placements working with children under the New Deal programme. We have investigated the allegations in press articles of 8 December, but have been unable to substantiate them.

Mr. Green: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to instigate a review of New Deal placements involving contact with children. [63370]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Those providing such placements are contractually required to undertake relevant checks. We will investigate any specific cases in which it is claimed that unsuitable people have gained jobs with children through the New Deal. There is currently a wider review through an Interdepartmental Working Group looking at many issues around preventing unsuitable people working with children.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what steps he is taking to prevent convicted sex offenders obtaining placements working with children under the New Deal programme; [63887]

(2) what assessment he has made of the risk of convicted sex offenders being offered placements working with children under the New Deal programme; and what steps he is taking to prevent such placements being made. [63888]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The primary responsibility for checking the suitability of people they recruit rests firmly with the employers. Guidance has been issued to ensure that everybody working in the Employment Service understands their responsibilities. No Employment Service officer would knowingly submit a serious offender for a job working with children but they have been reminded of the need for vigilance and of the importance of reminding employers of their responsibilities.

The Employment Service is already working closely with other agencies, including the Home Office, to explore what else can be done, including more effective arrangements for the exchange of information.

New Deal (Young People)

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the monthly expenditure on *(a)* Gateway provision and *(b)* other provision for the New Deal for young people by region from January to the end of September. [63276]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Expenditure which has been brought to account by the Employment Service since national roll-out of New Deal for Gateway provision is £814,540 and £8.9 million for the New Deal options. This is shown in the table.

Region	*April*	*May*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*	*Total*
Northern							
Gateway	25	15,927	39,556	166,209	362,232	15,302	599,251
Option	18,090	110,403	151,761	320,215	435,379	608,580	1,644,428
North West							
Gateway	24	13,185	56,507	224,563	238,678	198,129	731,086
Options	47,920	72,179	192,934	268,465	468,285	611,478	1,660,961
EME							
Gateway	154	7,202	18,317	36,916	59,360	50,291	172,240
Options	3,130	9,170	29,708	70,353	145,129	268,805	526,295
Y&H							
Gateway	230	6,339	46,321	92,932	114,086	191,245	451,153
Options	50,440	74,431	185,490	310,442	570,784	592,391	1,783,978
West Midlands							
Gateway	6	8,526	29,972	29,490	71,324	112,581	251,899
Options	13,680	27,507	94,251	159,183	222,187	370,822	887,630
South West							
Gateway	104	7,576	27,570	56,277	47,028	47,245	185,800
Options	37,060	63,565	145,500	257,255	324,714	387,582	1,215,676

Region	April	May	June	July	August	September	Total
LSE							
Gateway	39	16,851	300,898	179,170	331,267	471,237	1,299,462
Options	15,410	38,591	95,497	178,501	369,935	579,576	1,277,510
Scotland							
Gateway	30,090	2,052	55,083	71,018	103,926	106,104	368,273
Options	20,590	31,470	117,646	211,567	237,351	378,654	997,278
Wales							
Gateway	20	2,921	11,593	77,960	112,375	93,223	298,092
Options	22,330	61,660	109,598	165,160	201,872	404,428	965,048

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63875]

Mr. Mudie: The overriding principle of Civil Service recruitment procedures is that they should be fair, and selection should be on merit at each stage.

Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin, and not nationality. The 10 minority ethnic origin categories monitored by DfEE are those used in the 1991 census, which did not include an Irish category. The use of these categories will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Engineering Qualifications

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received concerning the current range of engineering qualifications in further and higher education; and what work he has commissioned to review these qualifications. [63551]

Mr. Mudie: The Department has received a number of letters on these issues. The results of a Department-commissioned study of national occupational standards for engineering were published in 1996. National Vocational Qualifications at levels 2 and 3 were subsequently revised to take account of those standards. Draft Higher Level National Occupational Standards for Engineering were published recently and once those have been approved NVQs at level 4 will be revised. As part of its creation of a national framework of qualifications, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority is working with the awarding bodies to ensure that other vocational qualifications in engineering meet the criteria for approval.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared. [62840]

Mr. Mudie: The Special Advisers in the Department for Education and Employment are Conor Ryan (full time), Hilary Benn (full time), Tom Bentley (part time) and Sophie Linden (part time); equivalent to three full time posts. They advise on the full range of Education and Employment issues for which the Department is responsible. The additional post was agreed by the Prime Minister to provide support to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State in dealing with written material, reflecting the particular circumstances he faces in undertaking his job on equal terms with other ministerial colleagues. In addition, Professor Michael Barber has been appointed as Standards and Effectiveness Adviser.

Special Advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements.

Teaching Assistants

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many teaching assistants were in post in schools at 30 September. [60980]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* The available information is shown in the table:

Full-time equivalent number of education support staff in maintained[1] schools in England
January 1998

				Other education support staff		
	Nursery assistants	*Special needs support staff*	*Minority ethnic pupil support staff*	*Total*	*Of which medical staff, librarians and technicians[3]*	*Total*
Nursery	1,828	209	62	38	[5]—	2,138
Primary	24,852	16,645	1,230	15,329	[5]—	58,055
Secondary	[5]—	8,823	151	17,576	16,042	26,549
Special[2]	[5]—	[5]—	59	[4]16,531	620	16,590
Pupil Referral Units	[5]—	365	1	63	[5]—	429
Total	26,680	26,042	1,502	49,536	16,662	103,760

[1] Includes grant maintained schools and middle schools as deemed
[2] Includes non-maintained special schools and special and general hospital schools
[3] Includes laboratory assistants/technicians, design technology assistants/technicians (including home economics assistants, craft technicians), IT technicians
[4] Includes teaching assistants and childcare staff employed to meet the needs of pupils with Special Educational Needs.
[5] Not applicable.

Teachers

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the schools which have been successful in bidding for advanced skills teacher status for a member of their staff. [63253]

Mr. Charles Clarke: Complete information about school participation is not yet available in respect of the bids for more than 1,100 AST posts submitted so far by local education authorities for 1999–2000. Schools and LEAs have until 5 February 1999 to bid for the funding from April 1999. We plan to create 5,000 advanced skills teacher posts over the two school years 1999–2000 and 2000–01. The specialist schools which have been successful in bidding for advanced skills teacher status for one or more members of their staff in the 1998–99 introductory phase are list

William Ellis School
All Saints Catholic School and Technology
St. Angela's Ursuline Convent School
St. Bonaventure's RC School
Mill Hill County High School
The St. Marylebone School
Homerton House Community School
Chestnut Grove School
Oakbank School
Bishop Heber County High School
Woolston High School
St. Aidan's CE High School
Hyde Technology College
Deanery CE High School
Shevington High School
The Lincoln School of Science and Technology
Latimer School
Campion School
Prince William School
George Spencer GM School
Sawtry Community College
Parkside Community College
The Greensward School
Chalvedon School
Saffron Walden County High School
Goffs School
Lynn Grove (GM) High School
Wymondham College (GM)
Deacon's School
Thomas Mills High School
Standish Community High School
Calday Grange Grammer School
Hermitage Comprehensive School
St. John's RC Comprehensive School
Ponteland County High School
Prudhoe Community High School
St. Joseph's RC Comprehensive School
Carmel RC Comprehensive School
Ninestiles Technology College
City of Coventry
Wodensborough Community Technology College
Ercall Wood GM School
Tudor Grange School
Thomas Alleyne's High School
Queen Mary's High School
Queen Elizabeth Grammar School
Beauchamp College
King Edward VII Upper School
The Robert Smyth School
Benjamin Britten High School
Denefield School
Cowes High School
Hugh Christie Technology College
Ravens Wood School for Boys
Cornwallis School
Sandwich Technology School (GM)
Peers School
Didcot Girl's School
St. Birinus School
Davison CE High School for Girls
Poltair Community School and Sports College
Richard Lander School
Redruth Community College
Penryn Community School
Fowey Community College
Torquay Boys' Grammar School
South Dartmoor Community College
George Ward School
Wyvern College.

Mrs. May: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what guidance his Department has issued to schools on the provision of supply cover for advanced skills teachers while they are operating in schools other than those in which they are usually employed; [63247]

(2) what financial arrangements will need to be put in place between the schools concerned where an advanced skills teacher from one school is providing support, advice or training in another school. [63252]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* The guidance in Circular 9/98, Teachers' Pay and Conditions of Employment 1998, applies. The funding available through the Standards Fund to the school which is an advanced skills teacher's main employer includes an element to meet the cost of supply cover when the advanced skills teacher is operating outside the school. Advanced skills teachers are expected to spend most of their time teaching in their own school.

Teachers (PE)

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many and what percentage of teachers in *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary schools are PE trained. [63440]

Mr. Charles Clarke: In 1996–97, some 26,000 full and part-time teachers in English maintained secondary schools (approximately 13 per cent.) had a post A level qualification in physical education.

Similar information for primary teachers is not available. However, primary teachers are trained to deliver the whole primary curriculum including physical education.

Post-devolution Expenditure

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what estimate he has made of the expenditure to be incurred this year by his Department on programmes or activities located in Wales as part of UK-wide programmes; and what will be the mechanism for supporting such expenditure when the National Assembly for Wales has been established. [63478]

Mr. Mudie: As part of UK-wide programmes, I estimate that the Department for Education and Employment will spend around £200,000 on programmes or activities located in Wales. The Government of Wales Act 1998 provided for a Transfer of Functions Order to be made to transfer Ministerial functions to the National Assembly for Wales. This Order was published in draft for public consultation on 12 November. Until the content of the Order has been finalised it is not possible to say with certainty what functions will transfer. Work is continuing within government to finalise the text of the Order and to establish whether any programme expenditure relates to those functions which will transfer. Funds will be transferred as necessary on this basis.

School Sport

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what representations he has received concerning the teaching of sport in schools. [63442]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Department has received a number of representations from organisations and individuals about aspects of teaching PE, including sport, in schools. Physical education must be taught to all children throughout their compulsory schooling and is a key part of providing them with a broad and balanced education.

Class Sizes

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will require admission limits for infant Key Stage 1 schools to be limited to multiples of 30 in order to meet the class size regulations. [63310]

Ms Estelle Morris: No. Although admission authorities have a duty to vary standard numbers where these are incompatible with the class size limit, adjusting school admission numbers to multiples of 30 is only one of a number of ways of meeting the limit.

Disabled Students' Allowance

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many students in full-time post school education took up the disabled students' allowance in each of the last five years. [63399]

Mr. Mudie: The disabled students allowance forms part of the mandatory award. Mandatory awards are payable to personally eligible students attending full-time sandwich courses leading to a first-degree or comparable qualification, DipHE or HND courses and courses of initial teacher training. There are three separate allowances—that for specialist equipment; for non-medical helpers; and the general disabled students allowance. Travel costs resulting from a disability can also be met as part of the award. The number of disabled students' allowances made by Local Education Authorities in England and Wales as part of mandatory awards in the academic years 1992–93 to 1996–97—the latest year for which figures are available—are shown in the table:

Number[1] of disabled students' allowances England and Wales[2]: academic years 1992–93 to 1996–97

Academic year	*Number of awards*[3]
1992–93	2,490
1993–94	4,050
1994–95	5,320
1995–96	6,550
1996–97	8,120

[1] The table shows the number of awards, not the number of students. Students can receive more than one type of disabled students allowance.

[2] Made by Local Education Authorities in England and Wales to students normally domiciled in their area.

[3] Number of awards rounded to the nearest 10.

Source:
P503G

Education Action Zones

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list those schools in education action zones that *(a)* have been identified by Ofsted as failing and *(b)* are under special measures. [63313]

Ms Estelle Morris: The table lists the schools within an education action zone which are, or have been, in special measures.

Education action zone area	*School name*
Barnsley Priory	Hunningley Junior and Infant School
	Milefield Primary School
Birmingham Kitts Green	Audley Infant School
	Heathland Primary School
	Sir Wilfrid Martineau School
Blackburn and Darwen	Intack Primary School*
	St. Antony's RC VA Primary School
	St. Mary's and St. Joseph's RC VA Primary School*
Brighton & Hove	Coldean Infant School
	Falmer School
	St. Mark's CE (VA) Primary School*
	The Marina High School
Calderdale	Mixenden Primary School
	Parkinson Lane Primary School
	The Ridings School*
East Basildon	Bradfield Junior School
	Briscoe County Junior
	Fairview Special School
	Manor County Junior School
	Northlands Infants School and Nursery
	Ryedene County Primary
	Vange County Primary School
Kingston Upon Hull	Perronet Thompson School
Lambeth	Archbishop Sumner's CE VA Primary
	Lilian Baylis School*
	Loughborough Primary School
	Mostyn Gardens Primary School
	St. Stephen's CE VA Primary School*
Leicester	Mary Linwood School
	New Parks Community College
	New Parks House Primary School
	Newry Junior School
	Queensmead Junior School
	Rowley Fields Secondary School*
	Southfields Infant School
	Wycliffe Community College
North East Lincolnshire	Bradley Park Junior School

Education action zone area	School name
Newham	Eastlea Community School
	Gainsborough Primary School*
	Scott Wilkie Primary School
	Star Primary School
Norfolk—Thetford	Abbey Farm Middle School*
	Canterbury First School
	Redcastle Furze First and Middle School
Nottingham City	Alderman Derbyshire School
Plymouth	Tamarside Secondary School*
Salford and Trafford	Old Trafford County Primary School
	Windsor High School
Sheffield	Hartley Brook Primary School
	Hinde House School
South Tyneside	Margaret Sutton School
Southwark	Charles Dickens Primary School
	Geoffrey Chaucer Secondary School*
	Grange Primary School
	St. Joseph's RC VA Primary*

Notes:
1. Schools in special measures are often referred to as failing schools.
2. * denotes that the school has been removed from special measures.
3. The information contained in the table is correct as of 8 December 1998.

CABINET OFFICE

Public Bodies

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement about Public Bodies 1998 and the Executive NDPB 1998 report. [64385]

Mr. Kilfoyle: The Government have today published *Public Bodies 1998*, copies of which have been placed in the Libraries of the House, and the *Executive NDPB 1998 Report* (CM 4157) which has been laid before both Houses. *Quangos: Opening the Doors*, published on 29 June 1998, promised that future editions of both publications would develop in line with the Government's policy of making public bodies more efficient, transparent and accountable. *Public Bodies 1998* and the *Executive NDPB Report 1998* take important steps in that direction.

Public Bodies 1998 provides a range of statistical information on those national and regional public bodies for which Ministers retain a degree of responsibility. This includes all nationalised industries and non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) as well as certain public corporations and NHS bodies. On 1 April 1998, there were 1,073 NDPBs, a reduction of 55 over the previous year. As of 1 September 1998, 32 per cent. of appointments to bodies listed in *Public Bodies* were held by women; and 3.7 per cent. were held by ethnic minorities. In line with the Government's commitment to increase substantially the information publicly available on these bodies, *Public Bodies* includes for the first time the terms of reference of each of the bodies listed, the names of individual chairmen and chief executives (or their equivalents) and e-mail and Internet addresses where these are available. *Public Bodies 1998* provides more information than ever before in a single document about this sector of government.

The *Executive NDPB 1998 Report* brings together performance and trend data on 81 of the largest executive NDPBs each with expenditure of over £20 million in 1997–98. The contribution of NDPBs is important to achieving the policy goals of the Government and the results that people want. The individual entries covering annual performance measures and key business summary data show that some NDPBs are performing well both in terms of meeting stringent performance targets and delivering more efficient and effective services. However, there are no grounds for complacency. Too many of the bodies do not have adequate performance measures in place nor proper measures of efficiency. It is vital that these measures are put in place so that it is clear where success is being achieved and where there are problems to be resolved if we are to make the best use of taxpayers' money.

NDPBs, like other parts of government, have the opportunity to increase the impact of their work and contribute to improvements in the quality and convenience of public services by linking up with other public bodies and working across boundaries to match people's needs. This will be a key area for further development over the next few years, and the Better Government White Paper to be published in the Spring will have more to say about what has been achieved and possible ways forward.

The *Public Bodies* and the *Executive NDPB 1998 Report* will in future years continue to develop and widen in scope. The Government recognise the important roles performed by the bodies listed in these publications and are committed to ensuring that they, like other parts of the public service, play their full part in helping to achieve the high level policy objectives set out in the Comprehensive Spending Review and the Public Service Agreements.

Both *Public Bodies 1998* and the *Executive NDPB 1998 Report* are available on the Internet via the Cabinet Office home page (www.open.gov.uk/co/cohome.htm).

Better Government White Paper

Ms Moran: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office when he expects to publish the Better Government White Paper. [63782]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: As I explained to the House on 21 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1267–68, the Government will publish a White Paper in the spring, setting out proposals for modernising government and joining up public services, to secure effective decision-making and services that work and respond to the people who need them. The Prime Minister has asked me to chair a Cabinet Committee to drive this agenda forward and the timetable remains firmly on course. I am keen to take into account a wide range of views and ideas in preparing the White Paper.

WALES

Ministerial E-mail Address

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what is his e-mail address. [62553]

Mr. Michael: I have asked my officials to introduce systems to provide e-mail access from outside the Department as quickly as possible. Work is already in hand to provide this facility on a general basis. My Department is already able to provide e-mail facilities to specific officials where a specific need can be

demonstrated. In addition the Department publishes e-mail addresses for replies to consultation exercises. On the Internet Web site for the National Assembly for Wales, members of the public are encouraged to enter into a debate about Assembly issues by posting views and questions to the Web site by e-mail.

Beef (Schools)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he is taking to encourage local education authorities to allow beef to be served in schools in Wales. [63404]

Mr. Hain: Decisions on whether to allow beef to be served in schools in Wales are for local education authorities and, in the grant maintained sector, schools themselves to take.

Mental Health Services

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what provision he has made for additional expenditure over the next three years on NHS mental health services in Wales; and if he will make a statement. [63476]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Wales to my hon. Friend the Member for Vale of Clwyd (Mr. Ruane) on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *392*. This set out the additional cash that will be available for the NHS over the next three years. I am now considering in detail my spending priorities in view of the range of pressures, including those arising from developments in mental health services in Wales and will make a further announcement in due course.

Community Hospital, Porthmadog

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will give approval for the North Wales Health Authority to go ahead with its proposal to build a new community hospital at Porthmadog to serve eastern Dwyfor and northern Meirionnydd. [63445]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The proposal to build a North Meirionnydd East Dwyfor community hospital will be considered along with all other priorities for 1999–2000.

Roads (Flintshire)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what was the total cost of *(a)* the new River Dee Bridge in Flintshire and its associated road works, *(b)* the Grade Interchange at the entrance to the Deeside Industrial Park, *(c)* the Queensferry Flyover and *(d)* the Hawarden By-Pass, at current prices; and if he will make a statement. [63938]

Mr. Hain: Scheme costs at current prices are:

(a) The A548 Third Dee Crossing (the responsibility of Flintshire County Council): £74.300 million (est.);

(b) A550 Deeside Park Interchange: £10.399 million;

(c) A494 Queensferry Interchange: £13.829 million; and

(d) A55 Hawarden Bypass: £66.007 million.

The figures for the three schemes for which the Welsh Office are responsible have been revalued to 1998–99 prices using current Treasury deflators.

Health Authority Spending

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will list the total amount spent on administration by each health authority in Wales in the last year for which figures are available. [63705]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: The information requested is given in the following table:

	£000
Bro Taf	4,772
Dyfed Powys	3,112
Gwent	3,264
Morgannwg	2,605
North Wales	3,744

Source:

Annual accounts of health authorities 1997–98

A5-A55 Dual Carriageway

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *184*, on the A5-A55 dual carriageway, what is the name of the preferred bidder. [63707]

Mr. Hain: The preferred bidder is UK Highways.

North Wales Health Authority

Mr. Ieuan Wyn Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many administrative staff are employed by North Wales Health Authority. [63706]

Mr. Jon Owen Jones: At 30 June 1998, the latest date for which data are available, there were 153 administrative and clerical staff (equivalent to 149 staff working whole-time) in post at North Wales Health Authority.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensioners

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate the cost *(a)* of giving in the current uprating to all those pensioners eligible for the National Insurance retirement pension who are aged 80 years or more an increase in benefit in line with earnings and *(b)* of such an increase if the current year's increase in pension for those aged 80 years or more reflected the rise in earnings since 1980. [62630]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the format requested because average earnings figures for September 1998 are not yet available. Such information as is available is set out in the table.

The estimated cost if the April 1998 retirement pension rates for pensioners aged over 79 years had been uprated in line with rises in earnings up to and including September 1997

£ million

	RP uprated by the growth in earnings between 1996 and 1997	*RP uprated by the growth in earnings since 1979*
Retirement Pension cost	40	2,780
Means-tested benefit offsets	–20	–940
Net cost	20	1,840

Notes:

1. The RP cost has been provided by the Government Actuary's Department.

2. Means-tested benefit offsets have been estimated using the 1995/6 Family Resources Survey and the May 1997 Income Support Quarterly Statistical Enquiry, both uprated to 1998/9 benefits and earnings levels.

3. Estimates are rounded to the nearest £10 million.

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the total numbers of pensioners for the current year who are *(a)* receiving income support, *(b)* entitled to income support but are not receiving these funds at present, *(c)* with incomes below £5,600, excluding those already accounted for by *(a)* and (b), (d) aged 65 to 74 with incomes between £5,410 and £9,710, (e) aged 65 to 74 with incomes between £9,711 and £16,200, (f) aged 65 to 74 with incomes between £16,201 and £17,000, (g) aged 65 to 74 with incomes between £17,001 and £18,630, (h) aged 65 to 74 with incomes above £18,630, (i) aged 75 and over with incomes between £5,600 and £9,900, (j) aged 75 and over with incomes between £9,901 and £16,200, (k) aged 75 and over with incomes between £16,201 and £18,000, (l) aged 75 and over with incomes between £18,001 and £19,010 and (m) aged 75 years and over with incomes above £19,010. [62628]

Mr. Denham: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

There are 1,425,000 pensioner benefit units currently in receipt of Income Support, excluding Residential Care and Nursing Home recipients. Information for other parts of the question is not available for the current year.

The number of pensioner benefit units estimated to be entitled to, but not receiving, Income Support in 1996–97 is provisionally estimated to be between 400,000 and 700,000. These estimates differ from those published on 1 October. An error in the published take-up estimates for pensioners has been discovered; a full set of corrected figures will be published in the new year.

In 1996–97 there were an estimated 1,250,000 pensioner benefit units with incomes of £5,600 or less who were not entitled to Income Support and did not receive it.

The estimated numbers of pensioner benefit units in 1996–97 given by income bands for pensioners aged 65 to 74 who were not entitled to nor receiving Income Support

Thousand

Income (£)	*Number of pensioner benefit units*
5,410 to 9,710	1,120
9,711 to 16,200	740
16,201 to 17,000	(50)
17,001 to 18,630	(60)
More than 18,630	300
Total	2,270

The estimated numbers of pensioner benefit units in 1996–97 given by income bands for pensioners aged 75 and over who were not entitled to nor receiving Income Support

Thousand

Income (£)	*Number of pensioner benefit units*
5,600 to 9,900	850
9,901 to 16,200	370
16,201 to 18,000	[1]—
18,001 to 19,010	[1]—
More than 19,010	80
Total	1,360

[1] Due to small sample sizes a reliable estimate for these cells cannot be supplied.

Notes:

1. Estimates in brackets are based on small sample sizes and should be treated with caution.
2. Estimates of recipients are rounded to the nearest 1,000.
3. Estimates based on the Family Resources Survey exclude the full time self-employed and are rounded to the nearest 10,000.
4. Benefit units are classified into age groups according to the age of the elder pensioner in the benefit unit
5. A pensioner benefit unit is defined as a single person aged 60 or over or a couple (not necessarily married) where at least one member of the couple is aged 60 or over.
6. Pensioner incomes are defined as before housing costs net income including all benefits, pensions, investment income and earnings, net of Income Tax, National Insurance contributions, contributions to occupational pensions schemes and Council Tax.

Source:

1. Estimates of the number of recipients of Income Support are taken from the May 1998 Quarterly Statistical Enquiry and exclude pensioners in Residential Care or Nursing Homes.
2. All other estimates are based on an analysis of the 1996–97 Family Resources Survey which is a survey of private households in Great Britain.

Child Support

Shona McIsaac: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what powers the CSA possesses to follow up cases in respect of absent parents who have moved to a different country; and what plans he has to review them. [63395]

Angela Eagle: The Child Support Act only applies where both parents and the child are habitually resident in the UK. In some circumstances a person can be regarded as habitually resident in more than one country. In such cases, child support liability may still exist even though a non-resident parent is living abroad.

If there is no child support liability the parent with care has recourse to the courts to obtain maintenance. The Lord Chancellor's Department administers reciprocal

enforcement arrangements with a number of other countries. Under these provisions many foreign courts can enforce a British order for maintenance.

The outcome of the consultation process on the Green Paper, "Children First: a new approach to child support", together with our detailed proposals for reforming the Child Support system, will be announced in due course.

Incapacity Benefit (Appeals)

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many incapacity benefit paper appeals relating to the all-work-test were processed in the last four quarters for which figures are available; and what percentage was decided in the claimant's favour. [63958]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

Incapacity benefit (all works test)

	Paper breakdown	
	All appeals	*Percentage in appellant's favour*
Q2 1998	2,880	11.9
Q1 1998	4,036	12.2

Notes:
Q2 April–June 1998
Q1 January–March 1998
Source:
100 per cent. computer extract from Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) systems

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many incapacity benefit appeals relating to the all-work-test were heard in the last four quarters for which figures are available; and what percentage were decided in the appellant's favour where the appellant *(a)* attended the hearing but was not represented, *(b)* was represented but did not attend, *(c)* attended and was represented and *(d)* did not attend and was not represented. [63957]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the table.

Incapacity benefit (all work test)

	Q2 1998	*Q1 1998*	*Q4 1997*	*Q3 1997*
Appellant only attended				
All appeals	4,100	4,226	3,714	3,793
Percentage in appellant's favour	52.6	52.2	54.1	51.4
Representative only attended				
All appeals	260	240	237	220
Percentage in appellant's favour	50.8	57.5	45.1	43.2
Both attended				
All appeals	4,281	3,723	4,249	4,094
Percentage in appellant's favour	67.5	68.2	70.2	69.2
Not attended				
All appeals	3,998	3,485	4,834	5,005
Percentage in appellant's favour	24.2	25.3	14.5	10.9

Notes:
Q2 April–June 1998
Q1 January–March 1998
Q4 October–December 1997
Q3 July–September 1997
Source:
100 per cent. computer extract from Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) systems

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many incapacity benefit claimants have *(a)* failed the all-work test, *(b)* appealed against disallowance of the test, *(c)* had their benefit re-instated prior to the hearing of the appeal and *(d)* had their appeals upheld. [63956]

Mr. Timms: Between April 1995 and 31 August 1998, 321,791 claims for Incapacity Benefit were disallowed following examination under the all work test.

Up to 31 August 1998, 169,247 appeals had been lodged with the Independent Tribunal Service. In the cases appealed, 2,797 decisions were reversed on review by the adjudication officer and 49,951 by an appeal tribunal.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63882]

Mr. Denham: Civil Service recruitment is based on the principle of fair and open competition and that selection should be on merit at each stage.

Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin and not nationality. The nine ethnic origin categories monitored by this Department are those used in the 1991 census, which did not include an Irish category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Incapacity Benefit

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the annual savings are to date, including administrative costs, arising from the replacement of invalidity benefit by incapacity benefit; and what estimate he made of the savings which would arise from the change. [63955]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is set out in the table.

The original estimates for benefit savings from the introduction of Incapacity Benefit and revised estimates produced in 1996

£ million

	1995–96	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*
Initial savings estimates (September 1993)	415	1,185	1,720	—
Latest available savings estimates (November 1996)	280	790	1,350	1,830

Notes:
1. No further estimates have been made and it is not possible to quantify the effects on administrative costs.
2. Actual savings figures arising from the replacement of Invalidity Benefit by Incapacity Benefit are not available as it is not possible to say whether an individual found capable of work following application of the all work test would have been found capable under the old Invalidity Benefit medical controls.
Source:
DSS. All figures cash prices.

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many people between the ages of 20 and 25 years do not have the required national insurance contribution record to qualify for incapacity

benefit *(a)* under the current system and *(b)* under the changes proposed in Support for Disabled People (Cm 4103). [63949]

Mr. Timms: The main change proposed is that people should be required to have paid National Insurance contributions on earnings equivalent to 25 times the lower earnings limit in one of the two tax years preceding their claim, rather than in any tax year.

The latest available figures show that there are about 2,470,000 people aged 20 to 25 who have not paid the contributions in any tax year necessary for entitlement to Incapacity Benefit under the current system and about 2,530,000 who have not paid the contributions in the two most recent tax years for entitlement under the proposed system. It is not known how many of these would actually claim Incapacity Benefit.

Notes:

1. The information refers to the number of people without the required National Insurance contributions in 1997 (the most recent information available). The qualifying tax years for the new condition are therefore tax years 1994–95 and 1995–96.

2. Numbers have been rounded to the nearest 10,000.

Source:

DSS: Lifetime Labour Market Database which contains a 1 per cent. sample from the National Insurance Recording System (NIRS) taken at February 1997.

Widows' Benefits

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the current average SERPS enhancement to the widow's pension and to widowed mother's benefits is for those whose husbands have remained contracted into SERPS; and what the average widow's benefit is for contracted-out occupational pension schemes. [63951]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows.

The average additional pension paid to a widow, resident in Great Britain, whose husband had never contracted out of SERPS is £10.75 per week.

Where the husband contracted out of SERPS at some point in his working life, the average additional pension paid is £21.70 per week.

The average additional pension for all widows resident in Great Britain is £16.09.

Source:

5 per cent. sample of the Pensions Strategy computer system at 31 March 1998.

Benefit Claimants

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many new claimants there have been since July for *(a)* state pension, *(b)* state pension with a SERPS enhancement, *(c)* contribution-based jobseeker's allowance, *(d)* incapacity benefit and *(e)* widow's benefit. [63953]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Benefit	*Number of claims July-October 1998*
Retirement Pension	194,000
Retirement Pension with SERPS[1]	97,000
Jobseekers Allowance[2]	1,100,000
Incapacity Benefit	316,000
Widows Benefit including Widows Payment[3]	13,000
Widows Pension/Widowed Mother's Allowance included in above[4]	10,000

[1] Exact numbers not known but about half of all Retirement Pension claims have SERPS entitlement

[2] A claim for Jobseeker's Allowance has to be made before it can be established whether the contributory element of Jobseeker's Allowance is payable. To date no figures are available for the number of individuals who are paid the contributory element of Jobseeker's Allowance.

[3] All widows can claim the £1,000 Widow's Payment Widows.

[4] Widows Pension or Widowed Mothers Allowance entitlement is examined after consideration of the £1,000 payment. The figures quoted are those where there is prima facie entitlement to Widows Pension or Widowed Mothers Allowance.

Source:
Central Data Unit

National Insurance

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security by what date those who have been underpaid as a result of the shut-down of the new national insurance computer will receive the full payments to which they are entitled. [63954]

Mr. Timms: All customers who are receiving interim or emergency awards of benefit will automatically have their entitlement reviewed. Any arrears due will be paid in full. The NIRS2 system is supporting the majority of business processes and once full functionality is available review of the cases affected will commence. It is not yet certain when this work will be complete.

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many pensioners have, as a result of the shut-down of the new national insurance computer, been underpaid by *(a)* 1p to £1 per week, *(b)* £1 to £10 per week and *(c)* £10 to £100 per week. [63952]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available until all the affected cases have been reassessed. This reassessment is expected to commence in the first quarter of 1999.

Lone Parents

Mr. Quentin Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what the total cost of running the New Deal for Lone Parents from July 1997 to 25 September 1998 has been, broken down by Employment Service regions; and how much of this was spent on *(a)* advertising, *(b)* personal advisers and *(c)* other Employment Agency services. [63950]

Angela Eagle: The information is not available in the format requested. Such information as is available is as follows:

Phase 1 of the New Deal for Lone Parents (NDLP) started on 21 July 1997 and ran until the main national rollout of the programme commenced on 26 October 1998. It was delivered in four areas by the Benefits

Agency and four areas by the Employment Service. Phase 2 commenced on 6 April 1998. There was a period of overlap between Phases 1 and 2.

The Benefits Agency ran the NDLP in Phase 1 only between 21 July 1997 and 25 October 1998. There are no separate figures for the Benefits Agency advertising costs for Phase 1.

The cost of the Advisers in the four Benefits Agency areas for that period was as follows:

£

	Adviser costs
North Cheshire	241,337
North Worcestershire	233,776
Sheffield	248,253
Cambridge	339,469

The Benefits Agency did not have a separate allocation for Employment Service Programmes but were able to refer people to the Employment Service.

Expenditure details are not available in the same format for the Employment Service for Phase 1 of the NDLP between the period 21 July 1997 until 31 March 1998. However, the Employment Service's financial allocations for their regions for Phase 1 for 21 July 1997 to 31 March 1998 was as follows:

£

	Running costs	*ES Programmes*
London and South East	262,676	85,100
Wales	208,132	67,429
West Midlands	145,824	44,203
Scotland	103,225	33,442

Phase 2 of the NDLP extended the service to all lone parents who made a new claim for Income Support whose youngest child was aged at least 5 years and three months and those with younger children who put themselves forward. There were costs involved with the preparation of this phase of the programme which fell in the 1997–98 financial year. Expenditure details on Phase 2 of the NDLP in the 1997–98 financial year were not separately captured. However, the Employment Service financial allocations during that financial year for Phase 2 was as follows:

£

	Running costs[1]
Northern	58,235
Yorks and Humberside	80,665
East Midlands and Eastern	79,004
London and South East	296,497
South West	64,648
Wales	58,854
West Midlands	83,187
North West	116,862
Scotland	84,034

The Employment Service captured actual expenditure for the period 1 April 1998 to 30 September 1998 for the combined Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the NDLP. Separate expenditure for the two distinct strands of the NDLP is not available. The regional breakdown of this is as follows:

£

	Running costs[1]
Northern	204,327
Yorks and Humberside	297,436
East Midlands and Eastern	270,455
London and South East	987,706
South West	375,845
Office for Wales	305,076
West Midlands	333,279
North West	518,405
Office for Scotland	344,028

[1] From 1 April 1998 Employment Service is recording expenditure details in respect of NDLP under the headings of Paybill, General Administrative Expenditure and ES Programme expenditure. The Paybill details do not show the costs of Advisers as a separate item and would include the costs of Adviser managers and clerical support etc.

The vast majority of publicity costs surrounding Phase 1 of NDLP were paid centrally and fell in the 1997–98 financial year. These amounted to £384,553. There would have been other much smaller local publicity costs for both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of NDLP and these would be contained in the expenditure/allocation details shown above.

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many lone parents with children of school age were receiving income support in Oxfordshire on 1 December. [63647]

Angela Eagle: The administration of benefits is a matter for Peter Mathison, Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Mr. Peter Mathison to Mr. Shaun Woodward, dated 14 December 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many lone parents with children of school age were receiving income support in Oxfordshire on 1st December.

The available figures are included in the attached table.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

	Number
May 1998	
Lone Parents with children of school age in receipt of Income Support in Oxfordshire	4,000

Notes:

1. Lone Parents are defined as single people with dependants who are not in receipt of a disability or pensioner premium.
2. School age children are taken to be aged between 5 and 18 years inclusive, and it is lone parents who have at least one child within this range who are included. However, these lone parents might also have children younger than school age.
3. The information has been provided by the Analytical Services Division 1 of the DSS using the postcode's for Oxfordshire. The figures are provisional and subject to change.
4. The definition of Oxfordshire used is based on version 1 of the 1998 postcode directory.
5. The figures provided relate to receipt of Income Support as at May 1998 and have been taken from the Income Support Statistics Quarterly Enquiry May 1998 which is the latest available.
6. Figures are based on a 5% sample and therefore subject to a degree of sampling error.
7. Figures have been rounded to the nearest thousand.

Income Support (Pensioners)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will place in the Library the report on research into why some pensioners do not claim income support. [63703]

Mr. Denham: Research to understand why pensioners do not claim the Income Support to which they are entitled was begun at the end of last year. The fieldwork is now complete and a report is being prepared. Preliminary findings from qualitative research were published in June 1998 and a copy was placed in the Library. Full results are due next year, and publication will follow as soon as possible. The report will also be placed in the Library.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* total expenditure and *(b)* expenditure by programme by his Department in Scotland on areas covered by the exceptions under (i) D.5 of Head D and (ii) F.1 of Head F in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998. [63799]

Mr. Timms: Schedule 5, Head D.5 of the Scotland Act relates to Parliament's role in promoting energy conservation. This Department is conscious of the need to conserve energy, but does not directly incur expenditure in doing so, following the letting of its estates contract to an outside contractor, Trillium, in April 1998. Trillium are currently developing a number of spend-to-save measures.

Schedule 5, Head F.1 of the Scotland Act lists social welfare matters which are excepted from the reservation of Social Security. All these matters in Scotland are currently the responsibility of my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Scotland and this Department has no responsibility for expenditure on them. They are identified in the Act to make it clear that they are not included within the definition of Social Security.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the offices or agencies under his control which will be subject to L.2 of Head L in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998; how many people are currently employed in these offices; and what equal opportunities practices are adopted in these offices. [63800]

Mr. Timms: This Department consists of a Headquarters business unit and a number of Executive Agencies; the Benefits Agency, Contributions Agency, Child Support Agency, Information Technology Services Agency and War Pensions Agency. In total, there are 9,434 Departmental staff in Scotland.

The Department is committed to providing equality of opportunity for all staff, in all of its business units, in all locations. This commitment is set out in the Department's Equal Opportunities policy statement which was revised and issued to all staff in September. A copy has been placed in the Library.

Equal Opportunities practices are integral to the work of the Department, both in terms of employment practices and service to customers. Examples include Equal Opportunities training for all staff, establishing consultative/development staff groups, a network of Harassment Advisers in each business unit, and implementing a range of "family friendly" policies such as career breaks and alternative working patterns.

In addition, the Department uses the Employment Service's "positive about disabled people" symbol, conducts disability awareness sessions for staff and has completed staff disability surveys using the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) definition of disability. An increasing number of buildings occupied by the Department now fully meet the requirements of the DDA, and the impetus will be maintained by our private sector partner, Trillium, as they continue to upgrade the buildings.

Correspondence

Mr. Winnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the hon. Member for Walsall, North will receive a reply to his letter dated 27 October to the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency regarding a constituent (ref. 6432). [64008]

Angela Eagle: The Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency replied to the hon. Member on 11 December 1998.

Benefit Integrity Project

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) what percentage of cases reviewed under the Benefit Integrity Project have resulted in claimants *(a)* losing their entitlement, *(b)* having the level of their entitlement reduced and *(c)* having the level of their entitlement increased; [63507]

(2) how many complaints have been lodged by disability living allowance claimants as a result of decisions reached as a result of the Benefit Integrity Project, in each month since its introduction; [63508]

(3) how many people in receipt of disability living allowance have been reviewed under the Benefit Integrity Project since its introduction. [63506]

Mr. Timms: The administration of the Benefit Integrity Project is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Jim Cunningham, dated 14 December 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking how many people in receipt of Disability Living Allowance (DLA) have been reviewed under the Benefit Integrity Project (BIP), what percentage of cases reviewed under the BIP have resulted in claimants (a) losing their entitlement, (b) having the level of their entitlement reduced and (c) having the level of their entitlement increased, and how many complaints have been lodged by DLA claimants as a result of decisions reached following a BIP review for each month since its introduction.

Since its introduction 149,054 customers in receipt DLA have had their claims examined by the BIP. Benefit was removed in 8.13% (12,118) cases, reduced in 13.03% (19,424), and increased in 2.26% (3,373). In 76.58% (114,139) of cases entitlement was unchanged.

Statistical information about the BIP is published on a monthly basis and is placed in the House of Commons Library.

Where a customer is dissatisfied with the outcome of a BIP review, or simply dissatisfied with a decision, their normal course of action would be to request a review or appeal. There have been 22,689 reviews and 5,925 appeals received. Complaints are recorded

only where a customer is dissatisfied with the standard of service they have received. Records of customer complaints about the BIP are available from June 1998 only and are as follows:

June: 121

July: 127

August: 179

September: 159

October: 111

I hope you find this reply useful.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what assessment he has made of the impact of the Benefit Integrity Project in generating cost savings and reducing the level of benefit fraud. [63509]

Mr. Timms: The administration of the Benefit Integrity Project is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Jim Cunningham, dated 14 December 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking what assessment he has made to the impact of the Benefit Integrity Project (BIP) in generating cost savings and reducing the level of benefit fraud.

The current estimate of benefit expenditure savings from the Benefit Integrity Project are: £8m in 1997–98, £30m in 1998–99 and £35m in 1999–2000.

The purpose of the BIP is to identify and put right incorrectness in the payment of Disability Living Allowance (DLA). The Benefits Agency carries out investigations into cases of suspected fraud in DLA. 1,929 cases, including 75 cases generated by BIP, were referred up to 31 March 1998. None of the cases generated by BIP have been referred for prosecution.

I hope you find this reply useful.

Benefits Agency (New Milton)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will review the provision of Benefits Agency services in New Milton. [62318]

Angela Eagle: The administration of the Benefits Agency is a matter for Peter Mathison, its Chief Executive. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Desmond Swayne, dated 14 December 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking if he will review the provision of Benefits Agency services in New Milton.

There are no plans at present to review the services provided by the Benefits Agency (BA) to the residents of New Milton. However the Agency is always seeking to ensure its services in line with the modern delivery of services expected by Ministers to support their Welfare Reform Programme. the District Manager for Solent and Forest, John Cullen, based in Southampton would be pleased to receive your suggestions on the service we currently offer our customers in New Milton.

Whilst there is no specific BA outlet at New Milton there is a Public Caller Office at Lymington which is co-located with the Employment Service Jobcentre (ESJ) and which offers a full BA enquiry service. The main BA processing site for the area in which New Milton is situated is at Totton. There are also ESJs situated at Hythe and Ringwood.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Sea Anglers

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) how anglers' landings are taken into account for quota management purposes when anglers' catches are unknown; [63361]

(2) which EU Member States impose restrictions on sea angling; [63360]

(3) how much fish was caught by sea anglers in *(a)* January to June 1997, *(b)* June to December 1997, *(c)* January to June 1998 and *(d)* June to September 1998 or other periods in 1997 and 1998 for which figures are available. [63359]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* European Union regulations on annual total allowable catches and quotas require that all landings be counted against a Member State's share of the total allowable catch for each quota stock. It is for each Member State to decide how its quotas are managed. We do not have detailed information on the management arrangements operating in other Member States although we understand that some have imposed restrictions on sea angling.

The Ministry does not collect information on catches made by vessels engaged in recreational angling. For the purposes of quota management in the UK all vessels used to convey pleasure anglers are, irrespective of their length, grouped with under 10 metre commercial fishing vessels. When therefore fisheries for individual stocks are closed to the under 10 metre commercial fleet by means of statutory prohibition orders, all vessels used to convey anglers fishing for pleasure are also prohibited from landing fish. Closures are imposed when the total available quota allocation for a particular species has been taken.

Zinc Bacitracin

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what consultations he has undertaken with *(a)* the manufacturers of zinc bacitracin, *(b)* poultry breeders and *(c)* farming unions about the European Commission's proposal to withdraw authorisation of zinc bacitracin; and if he will make a statement. [64030]

Mr. Rooker: We have received a number of communications from Forum Holdings Ltd. and are fully aware of their concerns. Copies of the Commission's proposal have been sent informally to the major interested parties and a formal information letter was sent to interests including poultry breeders and farming unions on 11 December.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the consistency of the European Commission's decision to withdraw authorisation for zinc bacitracin and three other veterinary medicines with the precautionary principle of the Commission's guidelines for its implementation; and if he will make a statement. [64026]

Mr. Rooker: Zinc bacitracin and the three other antibiotics covered by the proposed suspension are authorised as zootechnical feed additives for growth promotion and not as veterinary medicines. The proposal was made because of evidence assessed by the EU

Commission's Scientific Committee for Animal Nutrition that the use of certain antibiotics for growth promotion contributes to the overall selected pressure for resistant bacteria. The Government have received advice from the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food and from the Veterinary Products Committee which recommends the phasing out of certain antibiotic growth promoters. This advice confirms the principles laid down in the Swann Report in 1969 that antibiotics which may impair the efficacy of prescribed therapeutic antibiotics used in human medicine through the development of resistant strains of organisms should not be authorised for growth promotion.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the animal welfare implications of the proposed European Union ban on the use of zinc bacitracin; and if he will make a statement. [64033]

Mr. Rooker: An abrupt suspension, as originally proposed by the European Commission, would have been likely to cause considerable health and welfare problems for livestock. That is why we argued successfully for an extension which permits us to introduce the ban with effect from 1 July 1999, allowing producers some time to adapt to the loss of zinc bacitracin.

Eggs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of *(a)* the number of intensive poultry units in England and *(b)* the average number of birds found within such units. [63375]

Mr. Rooker: The figures obtained from the June Census returns do not provide sufficient detail to determine the number of intensive poultry units in England. In England and Wales, there are 23,000 farms with laying hens but not all of these will be cage production and indeed the vast majority have fewer than 100 birds.

It may be of interest to look at the current breakdown of shell eggs packed by type of production system. This is:

cage eggs—82 per cent.

free range—14 per cent.

barn/other—4 per cent.

This is from an estimated UK annual production (in 1997) of 9,540 million eggs.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will take measures to prohibit the use of the term 'farm-fresh' eggs to designate those eggs which originate from a battery system. [63378]

Mr. Rooker: The terms 'farm fresh', 'naturally fresh' and 'country fresh' may be used to describe eggs produced under any system. The word 'fresh' is reserved for eggs of Grade A quality, which is the highest standard of freshness and cleanliness laid down in the Regulations. The words 'farm' and 'country' are not considered to be misleading, as nearly all eggs are produced on farms of one kind or another or in the country.

I am aware that consumer research, undertaken by welfare organisations, has indicated that some consumers are under the impression that this reflects the method of production. No legislative action is currently proposed and any changes would have to be discussed in Brussels. I am aware, however, that the egg industry and supermarkets themselves are addressing this consumer concern.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what discussions he has had with supermarkets concerning the descriptions applied to eggs offered for sale to the public. [63377]

Mr. Rooker: None.

EC legislation governing the marketing of shell eggs specifies which exclusive terms can be used to indicate type of farming (but exempts organic/biological farming). These optional descriptions are 'free range' eggs; 'semi-intensive' eggs; 'deep litter' eggs; 'perchery' eggs (barn eggs) and 'eggs from caged hens'. All these marketing terms are optional. Producers or marketing outlets can therefore use these terms if they wish to clarify the method of production for consumers, providing the minimum production criteria set out in the marketing legislation is met.

As far as other descriptions are concerned, there is an obligation that neither the pictures nor terms used on egg packs are misleading. Trading Standards officers of local authorities have the power to act if this is the case.

Veterinary Medicines

Mr. Luff: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make it his policy to resist the withdrawal of authorisation of any veterinary medicine unless he is satisfied that the alternative products available on the market are at least as safe for *(a)* animals and *(b)* humans; and if he will make a statement. [64027]

Mr. Rooker: No veterinary medicine is authorised for use unless it satisfies stringent statutory criteria of safety, quality and efficacy. Safety includes the safety of treated animals and humans.

Antibiotics

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what estimate he has made of the weight of antibiotics used annually in farming; what is his policy in respect of this application; and if he will make a statement. [63381]

Mr. Rooker: The information is not kept centrally. However, industry sources indicate that a total of 756 tonnes of antibiotics, including 99 tonnes of growth promoters, were supplied to users including the farming industry and keepers of pets in the UK during 1996.

We are very concerned to ensure that human health is not compromised by the use of antibiotics in livestock production. To that end we have supported a proposal by the European Commission to suspend the use of four antibiotic growth promoters that are related to antibiotics used in human medicine.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list the offices or agencies under his control which will be subject to L.2 of Head L in

Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998; how many people are currently employed in these offices; and what equal opportunities practices are adopted in these offices. [63795]

Mr. Morley: As regards cross-border authorities, a list of these cannot be specified until appropriate subordinate legislation is made under the Act.

The State Veterinary Service (SVS) of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has 15 offices in Scotland and employs 81 veterinary and animal health staff. These staff are covered by the Ministry's policy of equality of opportunity for all staff. The Ministry's network of Equal Opportunities Officers includes two Equal Opportunities Officers with Responsibility for matters arising for SVS staff in these grades.

The Veterinary Laboratory Agency employs 26 staff at its Lasswade Laboratory. These staff are covered by the Agency's equal opportunities policy which has been developed within the framework of the Ministry's overall policy. There is an Agency Equal Opportunities Officer with responsibility for matters arising for these staff.

Recruitment Procedures

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has received on the recruitment procedure for staff of his Department; and if he will make a statement. [63045]

Mr. Morley: None.

Correspondence

Mr. Steen: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what was the exact number of letters he received from Labour hon. Members on problems facing the United Kingdom agricultural industry in the three months prior to 11 November. [61659]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* In the period 12 August to 11 November inclusive, MAFF Ministers received 1,894 letters from hon. Members. Many letters dealt with multiple subjects. To verify the exact number of letter from Labour hon. Members that raised problems facing the UK agricultural industry would require each one to be checked individually; the information could therefore be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Common Agricultural Policy

Mr. Plaskitt: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the total payments were by county in 1996 and 1997 under (i) the arable area payments, (ii) the suckler cow premium and (iii) the sheep annual premium schemes of the CAP; and in each case what the average farm payment was in each county. [62885]

Mr. Rooker: The following tables give the information requested. Payments are attributed to the country of the claimant's main holding. These figures represent payments by MAFF, in England, in respect of 1996 and 1997 claims—not the payments which were made in those years. For 1996 arable area payments, the figures update those previously published. These were given in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mr. Tipping) on 30 July 1997, *Official Report*, columns *327–30*.

Suckler Cow Premium Scheme

£

	1996		1997	
County name	*Total amount paid*	*Average payment*	*Total amount paid*	*Average payment*
Avon	817,708.89	2,962.71	846,665.20	3,078.78
Bedfordshire	342,329.18	3,356.17	305,756.27	3,184.96
Berkshire	493,323.69	4,043.64	528,281.19	4,294.97
Buckinghamshire	1,559,600.98	4,828.49	1,575,034.41	4,921.98
Cambridgeshire	864,716.23	3,588.03	823,903.90	3,566.68
Cheshire	923,735.48	2,624.25	883,144.26	2,620.61
Cleveland	285,923.17	4,332.17	280,376.92	4,248.14
Cornwall	5,657,474.18	4,939.21	5,799,582.77	5,019.65
Cumbria	8,123,383.26	5,180.73	8,237,040.46	5,273.63
Derbyshire	2,708,731.83	3,531.59	2,815,413.85	3,738.93
Devonshire	9,550,124.38	4,244.50	9,860,264.87	4,374.56
Dorset	1,314,384.42	3,723.47	1,275,537.94	3,603.21
Durham	3,447,213.04	5,032.43	3,370,057.32	5,052.56
Essex	648,986.79	3,004.57	649,168.13	3,121.00
Gloucestershire	1,983,408.21	3,666.19	1,929,540.39	3,696.44
Greater London	137,589.58	5,982.16	134,237.47	5,836.41
Greater Manchester	565,217.46	2,557.55	608,821.62	2,780.01
Hampshire	1,712,842.47	3,849.08	1,680,922.77	3,873.09
Hereford & Worcester	4,031,984.63	3,376.87	3,941,045.78	3,354.08
Hertfordshire	605,694.71	4,769.25	589,708.71	4,680.23
Humberside	1,540,481.66	4,043.26	1,481,576.96	3,993.47
Isle of Wight	312,302.95	3,548.90	274,307.36	3,386.51
Kent	1,518,867.29	3,768.90	1,500,005.22	3,916.46
Lancashire	2,191,582.68	3,652.64	2,241,523.47	3,662.62
Leicestershire	1,573,181.33	3,347.19	1,609,849.16	3,326.13
Lincolnshire	2,512,748.25	4,636.07	2,467,927.66	4,503.52
Merseyside	97,755.70	4,655.03	112,906.80	4,704.45
Norfolk	2,345,188.84	4,450.07	2,378,729.72	4,701.05
Northamptonshire	1,535,787.45	4,490.61	1,510,322.88	4,764.43
Northumberland	8,727,126.90	10,183.35	8,689,438.08	10,222.87
Nottinghamshire	803,129.63	3,187.02	735,287.11	3,063.70

Suckler Cow Premium Scheme

£

County name	1996 Total amount paid	1996 Average payment	1997 Total amount paid	1997 Average payment
Oxfordshire	1,431,569.33	4,559.14	1,471,970.79	4,794.69
Shropshire	4,000,423.39	4,329.46	3,823,304.39	4,192.22
Somerset	3,583,650.84	4,100.29	3,776,390.67	4,276.77
Staffordshire	1,928,621.67	2,852.99	2,031,455.26	2,948.41
Suffolk	1,048,109.63	3,867.56	1,002,944.29	3,742.33
Surrey	809,720.81	4,152.41	823,606.14	4,289.62
Sussex East	1,195,159.88	3,395.34	1,230,568.66	3,651.54
Sussex West	1,014,847.62	4,470.69	1,018,354.06	4,566.61
Tyne & Wear	263,719.58	5,382.03	249,685.89	5,201.79
Warwickshire	1,182,907.33	3,295.01	1,164,995.89	3,426.46
West Midlands	264,421.77	4,068.03	265,056.47	4,077.79
Wiltshire	2,135,086.48	5,849.55	2,015,091.62	5,613.07
Yorkshire North	6,699,597.18	4,297.37	6,722,334.23	4,416.78
Yorkshire South	813,138.42	3,764.53	798,726.67	3,877.31
Yorkshire West	1,713,963.17	2,294.85	1,726,977.86	2,977.55

[1] Cornwall figures include the Scilly Isles

Arable Area Payments Scheme

£

County name	1996 Total amount paid	1996 Average payment	1997 Total amount paid	1997 Average payment
Avon	4,709,856.56	11,774.64	4,632,220.50	11,580.55
Bedfordshire	19,600,435.19	33,053.01	19,213,927.00	32,510.87
Berkshire	11,992,117.78	44,746.71	12,021,801.07	44,857.47
Buckinghamshire	17,744,157.31	27,467.74	16,903,137.49	26,085.09
Cambridgeshire	60,573,233.24	28,464.87	57,731,621.09	27,425.95
Cheshire	7,418,313.97	7,850.07	6,971,443.50	7,231.79
Cleveland	5,355,734.45	25,026.80	4,499,510.69	21,324.70
Cornwall	11,978,012.05	6,927.71	11,904,647.11	6,865.43
Cumbria	4,652,279.00	4,949.23	4,518,377.54	4,791.49
Derbyshire	10,083,321.95	12,812.35	9,666,631.18	12,236.24
Devonshire	19,333,953.12	7,233.05	19,477,317.41	7,095.56
Dorset	17,653,073.25	24,758.87	16,692,638.94	23,248.80
Durham	13,681,610.76	20,729.71	12,314,045.64	19,240.70
Essex	59,628,462.58	39,515.22	56,679,741.35	37,736.18
Gloucestershire	26,201,454.51	26,736.18	24,857,058.62	25,494.42
Greater London	1,446,717.13	22,257.19	1,417,200.50	19,960.57
Greater Manchester	1,500,373.83	10,640.95	1,449,198.90	9,994.48
Hampshire	34,669,172.17	43,996.41	33,025,543.28	41,178.98
Hereford & Worcester	29,685,160.76	14,894.71	28,474,164.83	14,272.76
Hertfordshire	21,346,141.77	44,471.13	20,537,261.29	42,875.28
Humberside	61,090,717.76	29,555.26	57,441,627.46	28,033.98
Isle of Wight	2,880,123.33	21,985.67	2,800,164.38	20,145.07
Kent	36,810,840.88	34,958.06	35,217,874.64	33,255.78
Lancashire	5,285,404.17	11,174.22	5,081,869.22	10,676.20
Leicestershire	32,095,569.54	29,177.79	30,480,109.55	27,709.11
Lincolnshire	103,834,550.37	30,802.30	98,202,508.72	28,883.09
Merseyside	2,608,065.32	15,075.52	2,566,230.93	15,275.18
Norfolk	66,179,308.31	23,018.89	64,646,116.24	22,698.78
Northamptonshire	37,552,734.08	41,725.26	34,858,568.52	38,517.76
Northumberland	28,920,316.75	34,388.01	25,244,332.53	29,945.83
Nottinghamshire	29,463,123.16	29,316.54	27,586,567.83	27,367.63
Oxfordshire	38,289,565.52	41,483.82	36,115,566.98	38,750.61
Shropshire	25,231,785.80	15,750.18	23,107,332.22	14,560.39
Somerset	14,388,826.16	11,622.64	13,775,003.03	10,967.36
Staffordshire	14,970,014.94	17,971.21	14,189,836.22	16,872.58
Suffolk	56,350,044.61	26,923.10	54,053,967.15	25,999.98
Surrey	4,218,972.44	20,381.51	4,023,335.98	19,530.76
Sussex East	9,598,132.74	21,472.33	9,494,715.79	20,776.18
Sussex West	15,019,837.84	30,281.93	14,560,043.49	28,000.08
Tyne & Wear	2,892,173.94	26,055.62	2,578,807.20	23,658.78
Warwickshire	24,320,196.54	27,668.03	23,062,985.22	26,178.19
West Midlands	1,668,292.57	17,560.97	1,577,044.57	16,777.07
Wiltshire	36,319,698.82	35,364.85	34,866,404.61	33,525.39
Yorkshire North	62,744,381.17	19,937.84	60,399,843.43	19,229.49
Yorkshire South	13,001,288.98	24,301.47	12,261,439.91	23,355.12
Yorkshire West	7,172,345.27	18,677.98	6,782,993.64	17,437.00

Sheep Annual Premium Scheme

£

County name	1996 Total amount paid	1996 Average payment	1997 Total amount paid	1997 Average payment
Avon	626,274.48	1,875.07	536,008.17	1,675.03
Bedfordshire	364,281.84	2,412.46	298,036.70	2,069.70
Berkshire	379,386.98	3,084.45	333,566.54	2,900.58
Buckinghamshire	1,366,539.78	3,010.00	1,196,749.51	2,641.83
Cambridgeshire	350,487.67	2,246.72	298,430.30	2,116.46
Cheshire	1,459,010.04	2,448.00	1,282,084.04	2,180.42
Cleveland	299,262.84	2,877.53	260,347.12	2,433.15
Cornwall	4,340,592.80	2,844.43	3,788,393.50	2,609.09
Cumbria	20,419,757.10	5,763.41	18,704,776.89	5,333.55
Derbyshire	3,432,484.91	3,114.78	3,039,474.30	2,814.33
Devonshire	13,173,439.65	3,276.16	11,607,071.67	2,997.69
Dorset	1,372,756.59	2,624.77	1,216,767.41	2,428.68
Durham	4,909,834.61	5,052.42	4,377,307.38	4,701.73
Essex	444,932.55	1,934.49	390,624.55	1,808.45
Gloucestershire	2,514,595.60	2,622.10	2,162,417.79	2,320.19
Greater London	5,219.07	1,304.77	4,762.71	[illegible]2.54
Greater Manchester	572,751.11	2,878.15	521,129.40	2,[illegible]3.35
Hampshire	948,885.53	2,497.07	839,428.38	2,312.47
Hereford & Worcester	7,911,597.17	2,922.64	6,844,905.84	2,708.71
Hertfordshire	291,545.39	2,626.54	249,888.98	2,449.89
Humberside	841,132.58	1,942.57	715,045.21	1,706.55
Isle of Wight	211,043.49	2,198.37	188,506.17	1,984.28
Kent	3,184,720.06	3,331.30	2,751,932.40	3,044.17
Lancashire	5,854,129.93	3,702.80	5,324,015.98	3,454.91
Leicestershire	2,342,144.22	2,815.08	1,978,875.59	2,533.77
Lincolnshire	1,437,636.75	2,482.97	1,224,996.47	2,227.70
Merseyside	43,200.66	2,057.17	35,513.08	1,972.95
Norfolk	963,724.18	2,707.09	839,604.00	2,476.71
Northamptonshire	2,359,497.65	3,309.25	2,025,172.77	2,876.67
Northumberland	11,622,434.29	8,440.40	10,554,322.40	7,720.79
Nottinghamshire	598,930.55	2,348.75	515,877.50	2,261.27
Oxfordshire	1,299,529.56	3,116.38	1,152,876.42	2,832.62
Shropshire	6,548,560.79	3,628.01	5,713,876.73	3,266.94
Somerset	4,472,607.23	3,422.04	3,913,116.34	3,064.30
Staffordshire	1,938,797.88	2,118.90	1,666,866.88	1,874.99
Suffolk	471,582.51	1,702.46	395,560.34	1,475.97
Surrey	430,166.53	1,807.42	360,258.52	1,637.54
Sussex East	1,810,204.75	3,170.24	1,591,357.01	2,888.13
Sussex West	769,940.95	2,519.15	682,823.10	2,299.07
Tyne & Wear	74,064.49	3,086.02	57,635.64	2,505.90
Warwickshire	2,011,979.80	2,718.89	1,736,385.58	2,411.65
West Midlands	136,872.93	2,319.88	121,304.26	2,056.00
Wiltshire	1,323,788.80	2,995.00	1,119,461.94	2,652.75
Yorkshire North	14,711,206.88	5,901.80	13,224,077.56	5,318.99
Yorkshire South	531,892.32	3,056.85	477,954.90	2,844.97
Yorkshire West	1,652,352.27	2,643.76	1,464,135.44	2,494.27

Turkeys

Mr. Pickthall: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has in respect of the sale of uneviscerated turkeys. [62924]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* Farm fresh turkeys give consumers a choice and the Government would like to see traditional production of this product continue.

The Ministry will be issuing for public consultation a consultation document recommending that small off-farm poultry meat slaughterhouses should no longer be exempt from licensing. These proposals will not affect the exemption for small-scale on-farm production of traditional farm fresh turkeys.

Pesticides

Sir Alastair Goodlad: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what representations he has made to the Chancellor of the Exchequer about a possible tax on pesticides; and if he will make a statement. [63452]

Mr. Rooker: My right hon. Friend the Minister has made no representations to the Chancellor of the Exchequer on this matter.

Research Programmes (Wales)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will list *(a)* the research programmes and *(b)* the activities undertaken in Wales and funded by his Department, and the total estimated

annual expenditure on each in 1998–99; and what proportion of this funding will be transferred to the National Assembly for Wales when it has been established. [63480]

Mr. Rooker: Decisions on the placing of research contracts are based on the scientific quality and value for money of research proposals and not on the geographical location of contractors. The Ministry expects to pay some £125 million for research in 1998–99, spread between contractors throughout the UK. Some £7.8 million of this sum will be paid to Welsh contractors, but Wales will benefit from all relevant research regardless of where it is carried out. Post-devolution, it is intended that the Ministry will retain responsibility for the budget for R&D carried out in England and Wales. The National Assembly for Wales will be consulted about priorities for R&D and these will be reflected in the programme of work commissioned.

Written Answers to Questions

Wednesday 16 December 1998

SCOTLAND

Skye Bridge

Mr. Charles Kennedy: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the *(a)* draft Toll Order for the Skye Bridge and *(b)* draft Assignation Statement were placed in the Library in 1991; and if he will make a statement. [63320]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* A draft of the Order and the Assignation Statement were not placed in the Library. The Order was not subject to parliamentary procedure but the proposal to make the Order was advertised and a draft of the Order was available for inspection in accordance with the required procedures under the Roads (Scotland) Act 1984. There was no draft Statement. The procedures in the 1984 Act require the Assignation Statement itself to be made available for inspection with the draft Order and this was done.

Local Authority Capital Receipts

Mr. Welsh: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what powers the devolved Scottish Parliament will have to alter the rules governing the amount of capital receipts from right to buy which local authorities must use to repay their capital debt. [63323]

Mr. Macdonald *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* These arrangements were applied as a condition of the consent to local authorities to incur capital expenditure under section 94 of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 and it would be open to the Scottish Executive to alter those conditions.

Coalmining Communities

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the progress he has made in allocating resources to help with the regeneration of Scotland's former coalmining communities. [64628]

Mr. Macdonald: Scotland's former coalmining communities will benefit from a share of the £10 million being made available in recognition of miners' pension fund surpluses. In addition, we are making £1 million available to help these communities. I will be announcing details about how we will be targeting the funding for these communities, following consultation with Scottish Enterprise, the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Scottish Region of the Coalfield Communities Campaign. We will ensure that it is deployed to complement the range of initiatives already underway, including the new Social Inclusion Partnerships, which will be supported by £48 million over the next 3 years, for which former coalfield areas are eligible.

Procurators Fiscal

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the suitability of procurators fiscal with qualifications as solicitor-advocate *(a)* to be advocate deputes and *(b)* to prosecute in the High Court. [62670]

Mr. McLeish: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Advocate is responsible for the appointment of Advocate Deputes. My noble and learned Friend is satisfied about the competence of many Procurators Fiscal, including some with qualifications as Solicitor-Advocate, to undertake the work carried out by Advocate Deputes, including prosecuting in the High Court. However, he takes the view that it is necessary for the proper operation of the prosecution system in Scotland to maintain the traditional separation between the role of the Procurator Fiscal and that of Crown Counsel, to ensure independence of decision making and prosecution in respect of High Court cases. He is not, therefore, inclined to appoint Procurators Fiscal as Advocate Deputes.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the relative costs of using *(a)* members of the Faculty of Advocates and *(b)* procurators fiscal qualified as solicitor-advocates, as advocate deputes. [62671]

Mr. McLeish: My noble and learned Friend the Lord Advocate has responsibility for prosecutions in Scotland. The post of Advocate Depute is assessed for remuneration purposes at rates comparable with the Senior Civil Service, on which individual pay is based regardless of whether the incumbent is a member of the Faculty of Advocates or a Procurator Fiscal. There is therefore no significant difference in their relative costs.

RSA Priority Initiative

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list the companies which to date have been offered additional grant if they employ residents of assisted areas under the RSA Priority Initiative launched on 22 May. [63908]

Mr. Dewar: Under the pilot "RSA Priority" initiative, launched on 22 May 1998 in five particularly deprived areas of Scotland, nine companies have to date been offered the opportunity to receive additional grant if they employ residents of the designated areas. Information regarding offers of Regional Selective Assistance to individual companies is generally regarded as commercially confidential, although details of offers of £75,000 or more are published in "Labour Market Trends" once the company has received its first payment.

Identity Cards

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if the proposed identity card scheme for young people announced by Health and Home Department ministers will operate in Scotland. [63857]

Mr. Galbraith: The Government have no plans to introduce an identity card scheme for young people in Scotland, or in the rest of the United Kingdom. Ministers have, however, welcomed the various proof of age card schemes covering age-restricted products such as alcohol,

tobacco and fireworks, and we have encouraged representatives from these industries to consider the feasibility of developing a multi-purpose proof of age card.

Water and Sewerage Charges

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland which categories of properties, which are not owned or operated by recognised charities or other non-profit making bodies, benefit from relief on their water or sewerage rates; and what figures he has for the number of properties concerned and the amount of the relief afforded them. [63859]

Mr. Macdonald: Following the establishment of the three Scottish water authorities, relief from water and sewerage charges is no longer specified in statute, and is a matter for the authorities. Overall, it is estimated that the amount of relief is some £14 million per annum.

The exact information requested is, therefore, not held centrally and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Local Authority Ward Boundaries

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what his timetable is for making further orders to give effect to local authority ward boundary changes following the recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland. [64035]

Mr. McLeish: It is the intention to have orders made in respect of all local authority areas (apart from Orkney and Shetlands) by 31 December 1998. As a consequence of the Petitions for Judicial Review submitted by Orkney and Shetlands Island Councils, we will delay making an order in respect of these 2 areas until 15 January 1999, the latest practicable date if the new arrangements are to take effect for the elections due in May 1999. No order will be made, however, if the Court gives an indication before that date that a decree of reduction is to be granted in respect of the relevant Petition.

Mr. Wallace: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland in respect of which local authority areas in Scotland he has made orders to give effect to ward boundary changes following the recommendations of the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland. [64034]

Mr. McLeish: To date, orders have been made in respect of the following 16 local authority areas:

Aberdeen City
Angus
City of Edinburgh
Clackmannanshire
Dumfries and Galloway
Dundee City
East Lothian
East Renfrewshire
Glasgow City
Inverclyde
Midlothian
North Ayrshire
Perth and Kinross
Scottish Borders
West Dunbartonshire
West Lothian.

Incapable Adults Report

Dr. Moonie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will make a statement on the Government's policy on the Scottish Law Commission's Incapable Adults report (Scots Law Com. No. 151). [64388]

Mr. McLeish: The subject of decision-making on behalf of adults who are unable to manage their own affairs is an important one. The Government have been made fully aware of the issues through the report by the Scottish Law Commission in 1995 and subsequent public consultation, which attracted a substantial and carefully considered response. We accept the need for reform of the existing legislation in this important area of the law that provides support and protection for some of the most vulnerable people in society.

It will be within the competence of the Scottish Parliament to legislate in this area and this statement cannot pre-empt announcements about the Scottish Parliament's legislative programme. It excludes consideration of the SLC's recommendations about medical treatment and research and advance statements. These are sensitive issues and we received many responses on them in the consultation exercise. We have not made any decisions on these matters yet; and we shall also want to consider what emerges from the Lord Chancellor's recent consultation exercise on similar proposals for England and Wales.

We agree with the general principles proposed by the SLC that any intervention should produce a benefit for the adult; be least restrictive of the adult's freedom; wherever possible encourage the adult to use existing skills and acquire new skills, and take account of the present and past wishes of the adult.

In relation to particular aspects of the Report we agree with the SLC on the following:

The proposed definition of mental incapacity;

The current office of the Accountant of Court should be expanded to form a new office of Public Guardian;

The function of the Public Guardian should be to maintain public registers of all those authorised to take decisions on behalf of an incapable adult and to supervise and monitor the performance of financial guardians;

The recognition of continuing and welfare powers of attorney and the introduction of public scrutiny of the exercise of such powers;

The creation of a new concept of guardianship to provide for a broad and flexible system of one-off intervention orders and longer term guardianship, with appropriate welfare or financial powers as ordered by the court; and

That key decisions on applications, and in other proceedings under the proposed legislation, should be dealt with in the sheriff courts.

There are a small number of areas where we propose to vary the SLC's recommendations.

We propose to modify the SLC scheme for carers in domestic settings to have access to funds from the bank accounts of incapable adults, in order to meet daily living expenses. Under the revised scheme, the Public Guardian would grant authority to have stipulated payments made for a time limited period from the incapable adult's

account to a designated account. The Public Guardian would have powers to check that the incapable adult's funds were being applied for the intended purpose.

We propose to modify the SLC recommendations that residential homes should apply to the Public Guardian for authority to manage residents' finances. Under the revised proposals, registration and inspection authorities in local authorities and Health Boards would authorise the managers of residential establishments to manage the funds of residents who are incapable of so doing, up to prescribed limits, and in circumstances where no other arrangements would be appropriate for managing the finances of these residents.

We do not propose to follow the SLC recommendation that the Public Guardian should be able to be appointed as financial guardian to an incapable adult. We take the view, however, that the arrangements recommended for withdrawals from bank accounts and for intervention orders, and also for management of finances by residential establishments, should be sufficient to meet the needs of incapable adults with modest estates. The Public Guardian's functions will be focused on maintaining public registers of guardians and monitoring and supervising guardians with financial powers. Local authorities and the Mental Welfare Commission will monitor those exercising welfare powers on behalf of incapable adults.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Millennium Celebrations

Mr. Colvin: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to amend liquor licensing arrangements in respect of New Year's Eve celebrations for the Millennium, covering opening hours for 31 December 1999 and 1 January 2000; and if she will make a statement. [63277]

Mr. McFall: It is my intention to issue a consultation paper on 17 December seeking comments on a proposed relaxation of permitted hours for licensed premises and registered clubs in Northern Ireland at the Millennium Holiday and each subsequent New Year's Eve.

Countryside

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what steps she is taking to increase access to the open countryside in Northern Ireland. [63785]

Mr. Paul Murphy: It is proposed to issue a consultation paper on providing access to the countryside early in 1999.

World Heritage Sites

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the organisations in Northern Ireland involved in reviewing world heritage site nominations as a result of the Government's recent consultation. [64398]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Environment and Heritage Service under its chief executive, Mr. Robert C. Martin. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Robert C. Martin to Mr. Cynog Dafis, dated 16 December 1998:

As Chief Executive of the Environment and Heritage Service, I am responsible for operational aspects of protection of the built heritage on behalf of the Department of the Environment in Northern Ireland. I am responding to the Parliamentary Question which you put down on 17 December 1998 about the organisations involved in the review heritage site nominations.

In Northern Ireland, Environment and Heritage Service (EHS), in liaison with the Department of Culture Media and Sport (DCMS), reviews world heritage site nominations on behalf of Government. Specifically, EHS has attended a specialist working group convened by English Heritage on behalf of DCMS to advise on the compiling of a new UK tentative list. The Service consults the Department's statutory advisory councils, the Historic Monuments Council, the Historic Buildings Council and the Council for Nature Conservation and the Countryside about proposed nominations.

I trust you will find this helpful.

Export Surveys

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what categories of data are used in gathering information concerning export surveys from Northern Ireland; how the data are collected; and what part the NIERC plays in the gathering of such information. [63962]

Mr. Ingram: Export data for the UK as a whole are gathered by HM Customs and Excise. However, due to the limitations of this data at regional level, the Department of Economic Development and the Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland jointly commission the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre (NIERC) to undertake a bespoke annual survey of Northern Ireland sales and exports. NIERC designs the survey questionnaire, collects and analyses the data and assists with the preparation of the survey report for publication.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for what reasons the analysis of export behaviour by size of firm was discontinued after the first export survey of 1990; and if she will carry out a retrospective analysis of export data for the period 1990–97. [63964]

Mr. Ingram: A detailed academic report was produced on the first export survey published in 1992 (in respect of 1990 data). Subsequent export survey reports have been produced within a tighter timetable with the objective of giving a snapshot of key export information. Additional information is available on request including the retrospective analysis referred to in the question.

Inward Investment

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland to what extent the outflow of the profits of externally owned manufacturing companies is taken into account when evaluating the size of grants and subsidies to be given to companies to encourage them to locate in Northern Ireland. [63975]

Mr. Ingram: The potential outflow of profits from externally owned companies seeking to establish manufacturing operations in Northern Ireland is fully evaluated in assessing the amount of grant that can be made available.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the studies carried out by DED of Northern Ireland's competitive advantages in attracting inward investment; and if she will place copies in the Library. [63963]

Mr. Ingram: The Industrial Development Board for Northern Ireland (IDB) the arm of DED responsible for inward investment, examines among other issues Northern Ireland's performance in the inward investment market relative to competitors. IDB has not directly purchased or commissioned any study into Northern Ireland's competitive advantage in attracting inward investment. However, a report prepared by Price Waterhouse Coopers in 1996 into Northern Ireland's investment performance compared with the UK and Republic of Ireland makes comment on Northern Ireland's competitive advantages. For copyright and commercial confidentiality reasons this report cannot be placed in the public domain by IDB.

Census of Production

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how long the period is between completion of the collection of Northern Ireland Annual Census of Production data and their publication by the National Statistics Office in its annual Business Monitor. [63966]

Mr. Ingram: The Office for National Statistics publishes regional estimates of industrial production in the Annual Business Monitor approximately twelve months after the completion of data collection.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if data collected in Northern Ireland for the Annual Census of Production are available on a sub-regional basis. [63968]

Mr. Ingram: The Department of Economic Development does not have any results from the Annual Census of Production (now referred to as the Annual Business Inquiry) below NI level. However, the Office for National Statistics is refining the methodology for providing ABI sub-regional estimates with the intention of publishing these from the 1999 inquiry onwards.

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list the parties which have access to Annual Census of Production data on a confidential basis before the data are published by the National Statistics Office; and on what criteria such organisations are chosen. [63967]

Mr. Ingram: The Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre, commissioned by the Department of Economic Development to undertake the annual Survey of Sales and Exports, has confidential access to Census of Production data prior to publication. The Centre is the only organisation with access to such information which is given under legal direction (as authorised by Article 7 of the Statistics of Trade and Employment (Northern Ireland) Order 1988).

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will introduce local publication of the Annual Census of Production in Northern Ireland, following the establishment of the Northern Ireland Assembly; and what were the reasons for the discontinuation of local publication. [63965]

Mr. Ingram: I have no plans to reintroduce this publication which was suspended, due to lack of demand, following release of the 1985 results. Current data is available from the Office for National Statistics Business Monitor series. Future arrangements will be for consideration by the NI Assembly.

Economic Policies (Inquiries)

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will publish for each year since 1990 the number of contracts entered into by her Department and Northern Ireland Government departments and agencies with outside agencies and consultancy firms for the investigation of economic policy matters, indicating the subject matter of each inquiry and the date the report was *(a)* completed and *(b)* published, the name of the consultancy firm or outside agency involved and the cost of each contract; and how many contracts in each year went out to tender. [63978]

Mr. Ingram: Information in the form requested is not readily available and could be compiled only at disproportionate cost.

Regional Accounts

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (1) what estimate she has made of the effect on data for Northern Ireland GDP of manufacturing company profit outflows; and what estimate she has made of the size of such outflows; [63973]

(2) what plans she has to provide provisional estimates of the main macro-sectoral aggregates in the intervals between the publication of regional accounts in order to facilitate planning by the public and private sector; [63976]

(3) if she will list the parties which have access to the data for Northern Ireland Regional Accounts on a confidential basis, before the data are published in Regional Trends; and on what criteria such parties are chosen; [63970]

(4) what plans she has to reformulate the Northern Ireland regional account in line with EUROSTAT standards; [63971]

(5) which Northern Ireland departments are responsible for the preparation of the Northern Ireland Regional Accounts; and what is the length of the period between the collection and completion of such accounts and their eventual publication by the National Statistics Office in Regional Trends. [63969]

Mr. Paul Murphy: Responsibility for the subject in question has been delegated to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency under its chief executive, Mr. E. F. Jardine. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from E. F. Jardine to Mr. Kevin McNamara, dated 15 December 1998:

I am replying to your questions to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland about regional accounts as this matter falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency.

Answers to the five questions you tabled are given in the Annex to this letter.

Several of your questions mention the *Regional Trends* publication. Normally, the Office for National Statistics first publish the regional accounts in their monthly *Economic Trends* journal and in a news release. The information is then included in *Regional Trends* which is an annual publication.

If I can be of further assistance please do not hesitate to contact me.

Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, what estimate she has made of the effect on data for Northern Ireland GDP of manufacturing company profit outflows; and what estimate she has made of the size of such outflows.

Reply:

Gross Domestic Product is concerned with the physical location of economic activity and therefore its calculation is unaffected by profit outflows. No estimation has been made of the size of such outflows.

Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, what plans she has to provide provisional estimates of the main macro-sectoral aggregates in the intervals between the publication of regional accounts in order to facilitate planning by the public and private sector.

Reply:

The Office for National Statistics, who compile the annual United Kingdom regional accounts, have no plans to provide interim figures.

Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, if she will list the parties which have access to the data for Northern Ireland Regional Accounts on a confidential basis, before the data is published in Regional Trends; and on what criteria such parties are chosen.

Reply:

Regional accounts data are made available to all users at the same time by the Office for National Statistics, with limited exceptions on a strict need-to-know basis. These are: (1) government statisticians involved in the production and quality assurance of the estimates; and (2) Ministers and senior officials who are provided with copies of the articles containing the figures, no more than two days before publication in Economic Trends.

Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to reformulate the Northern Ireland regional account in line with EUROSTAT standards.

Reply:

From January 1999, the Office for National Statistics intend to publish the United Kingdom regional accounts, including those for Northern Ireland, on the new European System of Accounts (1995) basis.

Question:

To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland which Northern Ireland departments are responsible for the preparation of the Northern Ireland Regional Accounts; and what is the length of period between the collection and completion of such accounts and their eventual publication by the National Statistics Office in Regional Trends.

Reply:

The United Kingdom regional accounts are prepared and published centrally by the Office for National Statistics. The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, which is an agency within the Department of Finance and Personnel, assists in the quality assurance assessment of the Northern Ireland portion of the accounts before they are published by the Office for National Statistics. There is no delay between the completion of the accounts and their publication in Economic Trends.

Economic Forecasts

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to publish short-term and medium-term forecasts of the Northern Ireland economy to assist the private sector in its economic and forward investment planning. [63977]

Mr. Paul Murphy: There are no plans to publish Government forecasts for the Northern Ireland economy. However, the Northern Ireland Economic Research Centre—an independent research body—regularly publishes short-term and medium-term forecasts for the local economy. The Centre's most recent set of forecasts was published at the beginning of December 1998.

Profit Outflows

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what studies her Department has undertaken of the economic consequences of profit outflows for the economy of Northern Ireland. [63974]

Mr. Ingram: No studies have been undertaken by Government of the economic consequences of profit outflows for the economy of Northern Ireland.

DEFENCE

Ministerial Travel

Mr. Maples: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the journeys taken by members of the Cabinet in VC10s of the RAF fleet since 1 May 1997 indicating in each case *(a)* the name of the Minister, *(b)* the numbers of accompanying people, *(c)* the date, *(d)* their destinations, *(e)* the costs of the flight and *(f)* the identification number of VC10s involved. [62053]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 2 December 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave him on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *711*.

Gulf War Veterans

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library a copy of the document relating to Gulf War illness and depleted uranium leaked to Gulf War veterans; and if he will make a statement. [63046]

Mr. Doug Henderson: Two unclassified documents, both containing references to depleted uranium (DU), are known to have been removed without authorisation from the MOD's Medical Assessment Programme (MAP) last month and have since received some publicity. The investigation into their removal is now a matter for the Ministry of Defence Police. In view of the considerable public concern raised by misinformed media reporting of the contents of these two documents, I am today formally releasing both of them and placing copies in the Library of the House.

In addition, I have asked my Department to collate the information which it possesses concerning mechanisms which could be used to test for the presence of uranium in the human body. I will publish this work shortly. Contrary to some media reports, which were based on a misreading of these two documents, the MOD is not

conducting testing in relation to the possible exposure of Gulf veterans to DU, secret or otherwise. However, as might be expected, we continue to consider all aspects of Gulf veterans' illnesses, including any developments concerning the various suggested relevant exposures, where DU is one issue among many.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to test Gulf War veterans for the effects of depleted uranium. [63036]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* Any Gulf veteran who is concerned that his or her health has been adversely affected by Service during the Gulf conflict, including possible exposure to depleted uranium (DU), is advised to seek a referral to the Ministry of Defence's Medical Assessment Programme (MAP) for a full medical assessment. During this assessment, MAP patients are asked by the examining MAP physician to provide detailed information about possible factors, including DU, to which they may have been exposed during the Gulf conflict.

The kidneys are the organs most likely to be affected by the presence of uranium and the standard battery of tests carried out as a matter of routine on MAP patients includes a baseline trawl of renal function, which in turn includes serum creatinine, urea and electrolytes, a urine test for protein and blood and an ultrasound abdominal scan. Such tests should indicate the presence of any kidney damage in patients, although such damage would not necessarily have been caused by the presence of DU. The standard MAP tests do not, however, currently include a specific test to detect the presence of DU. The veterans who have so far been examined by MAP physicians have not exhibited symptoms which, in the clinical judgment of the examining physician, have indicated a requirement for a specific referral to another agency or organisation for DU testing. If the examining physician at the MAP considered it clinically appropriate for a patient to be tested for the presence of uranium, the necessary arrangements would be made.

I have asked my Department to collate the information which it possesses concerning mechanisms which could be used to test for the presence of uranium in the human body. I will publish this work shortly. The MOD is well aware that a link has been suggested between possible exposure to DU and the illnesses being experienced by some Gulf veterans. However, this is only one of a number of factors which have been suggested as causes of Gulf veterans' illnesses and, pending further medical and scientific evidence, my Department is keeping an open mind on this issue.

Our plans for future activity in relation to Gulf veterans' illnesses, including as regards DU, will continue to be guided by the emerging medical and scientific evidence on this subject.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what research he is undertaking on a relationship between Gulf War Syndrome and depleted uranium. [63064]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Ministry of Defence is conducting a range of research into aspects of Gulf veterans' illnesses. However, none of these programmes is specifically aimed at investigating the relationship between possible exposure to depleted uranium (DU) and the illnesses being experienced by some Gulf veterans. The MOD is well aware that a link has been suggested between DU exposure and Gulf veterans' illnesses. However, this is only one of a number of factors which have been suggested as causes of Gulf veterans' illnesses and, pending further medical and scientific evidence, my Department is keeping an open mind on this issue. My Department would, of course, be very interested to see any new relevant information on this subject.

Any Gulf veteran who is concerned that his or her health has been adversely affected by Service during the Gulf conflict, including possible exposure to depleted uranium (DU), is entitled to seek a referral to the Gulf veterans' Medical Assessment Programme (MAP) for a full medical assessment.

Mr. Alasdair Morgan: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place in the Library copies of the Medical Assessment Programme documents (reference MAP/102/22/1/Med pt 1) *(a)* DU Teleconference-Lt Col Graham, *(b)* DU Testing Protocol-Alan Casson, *(c)* Prime for 51 G EDTA-Dr R. Gabriel, *(d)* DU Information Pack-Alan Casson, *(e)* DU Testing of United Kingdom Gulf Veterans-Alan Casson, *(f)* Update-4 Sep 96-Lt Col Graham; what assessment the Medical Assessment Programme has made of the possible link between Gulf War Syndrome and depleted uranium poisoning; and if he will make a statement. [63306]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* The Ministry of Defence has already received a request from a member of the public for copies of the documents designated *(a)* to *(e)* in the hon. Member's question. This is currently being considered under the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. When this consideration, which has now been extended to include document *(f)* in the hon. Member's question, is complete, I will write to the hon. Member to advise him of the outcome.

The MOD is well aware that a link has been suggested between possible exposure to depleted uranium (DU) and the illnesses being experienced by some Gulf veterans. However, this is only one of a number of factors which have been suggested as possible causes of Gulf veterans' illnesses and, pending further medical and scientific evidence, my Department is keeping an open mind on this issue. We would, of course, be very interested to see any new relevant information on this subject.

Territorial Army

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many officer vacancies exist in TA centres in North Wales; what proportion this represents of total officer positions in North Wales; and what is the shortfall of officers in each TA centre in North Wales. [63653]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* There are 49 established officer posts in TA centres in North Wales, of which currently 7 are not filled. TA Officer posts not filled in each TA Centre in North Wales are:

Hightown Wrexham: 3

Colwyn Bay: 1

Queensferry: 1

Bangor: 1

Prestatyn: 1.

REME (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the costs of the extension and conversion of the existing premises at Queensferry Barracks to accommodate 101 Battalion REME after its transfer from Chorley. [63624]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Work into the exact cost of adapting the TA Centre at Queensferry to accommodate the Headquarters of 101 Battalion the Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers is currently underway.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what representations his Department has received in favour of retaining 101 Battalion REME and Cadet Force at Devonshire Road Barracks, Chorley. [63620]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* My Department has received representations in favour of retaining 101 Battalion REME and Cadet Force at Devonshire Road Barracks, Chorley, from my hon. Friend the Member for Chorley (Mr. Hoyle), the North West Parliamentary Labour Group, Chorley Borough Council, Adlington Borough Council, Whittle-le-Woods Parish Council and one individual who works at the TA Centre.

Plastic Baton Rounds (Northern Ireland)

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons plastic baton rounds replaced rubber bullets for use by the armed forces in Northern Ireland. [63931]

Mr. Spellar: Plastic baton rounds provide a more effective means of combating physical violence than the rubber bullets they replaced. The increased accuracy of plastic baton rounds also reduces the risk of accidental injury.

EU Defence Expenditure

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how much has been spent by each nation in the EU in each of the last 10 years in pounds sterling on defence *(a)* in total and *(b)* per head of the population. [64195]

Mr. Spellar: The information requested for calendar years 1987 to 1997 is shown for NATO members of the European Union. Comparisons of defence spending between nations are conventionally given in US Dollars rather than pounds sterling. Figures for calendar years 1987 to 1995 are those which have been published in successive versions of the Statement on the Defence Estimates (SDE). Figures for 1996 are based on information drawn from NATO sources and those for 1997 are as published in the MOD Performance Report 1997–98 (Cm4170).

Where possible the figures are published against a common definition of defence spending so that true comparisons can be made. Some anomalies and inconsistencies will, however, remain. Particular care is needed in making year on year comparisons of the figures for the UK where there have been changes in the definition of defence spending in recent years and major transfers of responsibility to and from other Government Departments.

Defence expenditure

(US$ million)

	1987	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Belgium	4,142	4,215	3,938	4,723	4,770	4,078	3,762	3,948	4,572	4,240	3,769
Denmark	2,127	2,336	2,162	2,610	2,614	2,799	2,702	2,741	3,125	3,086	2,816
France	34,529	35,909	35,085	42,794	42,399	45,654	42,593	44,381	47,735	46,402	41,545
Germany	34,233	35,369	33,638	42,793	39,893	42,399	38,629	35,933	41,906	38,990	33,416
Greece	2,972	3,465	3,208	3,776	3,907	4,248	4,076	4,347	5,059	5,582	5,532
Italy	16,806	19,148	19,754	24,752	23,583	24,567	21,185	21,190	20,041	23,458	21,837
Luxembourg	76	81	80	100	106	121	116	124	141	141	129
Netherlands	6,502	6,744	6,402	7,429	7,242	7,871	7,039	7,090	8,181	7,850	6,888
Portugal	1,135	1,261	1,319	1,711	2,006	2,415	2,241	2,281	2,819	2,601	2,559
Spain	5,738	7,319	7,700	9,556	9,033	9,620	7,211	7,617	8,464	8,616	7,508
UK	30,859	34,913	33,436	38,433	42,716	43,122	35,257	34,068	34,086	34,526	35,620

Defence expenditure per capita

(US $)

	1987	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Belgium	420	427	398	474	476	406	374	390	455	417	370
Denmark	416	455	422	508	508	542	522	528	600	589	533
France	623	646	628	759	748	796	738	764	820	794	708
Germany	561	578	550	550	499	530	481	438	509	475	406
Greece	298	347	320	375	388	408	392	417	481	531	526
Italy	294	334	344	430	409	424	365	371	349	409	379
Luxembourg	206	219	211	262	275	312	296	311	365	338	305
Netherlands	447	460	434	497	482	519	461	460	527	504	442
Portugal	111	123	128	165	203	229	226	231	285	262	257
Spain	149	188	196	243	231	246	183	194	216	219	191
UK	544	614	581	670	742	750	608	585	586	587	604

My Department does not regularly collect details of defence spending for EU members who are not members of NATO. Figures for these countries are shown in The Military Balance which is published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. The figures given in this publication for the last two years are shown below:

Defence expenditure

(US$ millions)

	1996	*1997*
Austria	2,098	1,786
Finland	2,255	1,956
Ireland	757	767
Sweden	6,501	5,481

Defence expenditure per capita

(US $)

	1996	*1997*
Austria	262	222
Finland	440	381
Ireland	209	210
Sweden	737	619

Chile

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many aircraft of the Royal Air Force participated at the biennial Air Show at Santiago, Chile in March *(a)* 1990, *(b)* 1992, *(c)* 1994, *(d)* 1996 and *(e)* 1998. [64016]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The figures are as follows:

Year	*Number of aircraft*	*Details*
1990	3	Harrier GR5 x 2, VC10K
1992	8	Harrier GR5/7 x 2; Tornado GR1 x 2; C130; Nimrod; Tristar; VC10K
1994	5	Harrier GR7 x 2; C130; VC10K; Nimrod
1996	1	C130
1998	5	Tornado F3 x 2; Nimrod; VC10K; C130

Army Training and Recruitment Agency

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the key targets for 1998–99 for the Chief Executive of the Army Training and Recruitment Agency. [64627]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Chief Executive of the Army Training and Recruiting Agency has been set the following Key Target for 1998–1999.

1. To meet the Adjutant General's requirement for commissioned officers.
2. To meet the Adjutant General's requirement for officers qualified for service in Field Force units following successful Special to Army training.
3. To meet the Adjutant General's requirement for officers' professional development training.
4. To meet the Adjutant General's requirement for soldiers qualified for service in a Field Force unit following successful Special to Arm training.
5. To meet the Adjutant General's requirement for soldiers' professional development training.
6. To achieve efficiency savings of 6% (34.7M).

Army Personnel Centre

Laura Moffatt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the key targets for 1998–99 for the Chief Executive of the Army Personnel Centre. [64625]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The Chief Executive of the Army Personnel Centre has been set the following Key Targets for 1998–1999:

1. To increase the percentage of posts which are manned (excluding posts gapped for less than 28 days and all posts for private soldiers and subaltern officers) to 91 per cent.
2. To increase to 91 per cent. the proportion of personnel posted in-year by the APC whose rank and Service qualifications meet the specifications of the post.
3. To increase the percentage of in-year postings authorised by the APC where personnel are given at least 6 months notification to 52 per cent.
4. To increase the percentage of change requests received by the APC which are authorised and/or accurately processed within 5 working days of receipt at the Document Handling Centre to 92 per cent.
5. To increase the percentage of due terminal benefits made by the 5th working day after discharge/retirement or following receipt of the correct authorisation paperwork by Pensions Division, whichever is later, to 96 per cent.
6. To develop by March 99 the comprehensive feedback mechanism for the continual measurement of customer satisfaction and to maintain that system thereafter.
7. To achieve a year-on-year reduction of 1 per cent. in operating costs.

Defence Military Assistance Fund

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the breakdown of expenditure under the Defence Military Assistance Fund in each of the last three years. [63864]

Mr. George Robertson: The Defence Military Assistance Fund is a cash fund, which is available to subsidise the cost of overseas military assistance in support of the Defence Diplomacy and Support to Wider British Interests Missions. The latter mission includes support to defence sales. Assistance may include the provision of training (either in country or in the UK), advice (by either military or civilian personnel), Loan Service Personnel and Short Term Training Teams.

The table breaks down expenditure, by country, under the Defence Military Assistance Fund for each of the last three years. This breakdown covers centrally administered programmes only, and does not include military assistance activities funded by Top Level Budget Holders, since these costs cannot be identified separately. Nor does it cover costs borne by other Government Departments, which are a matter for the Departments concerned.

1997–98—DMAF Expenditure

£

Country	*MOD Subsidy*
Albania	1,000
Austria	5,700
Bahrain	139,600
Baltic States	631,900

1997–98—DMAF Expenditure

£

Country	*MOD Subsidy*
Belarus	18,200
Belize	271,500
Brazil	262,200
Brunei	5,500
Bulgaria	94,600
Chile	581,600
Czech Republic	193,300
Egypt	135,400
Ethiopia	38,700
Finland	1,600
Georgia	50,300
Germany	100,000
Greece	58,300
Hungary	88,500
India	253,200
Indonesia	62,400
Ireland	5,000
Jamaica	27,700
Jordan	146,400
Kenya	145,100
South Korea	279,700
Kuwait	71,200
Macedonia	56,200
Malaysia	516,500
Moldova	29,300
Morocco	56,000
Nepal	24,900
New Zealand	37,700
Oman	1,402,200
Pakistan	63,500
Philippines	68,000
Poland	83,700
Portugal	49,400
Qatar	169,900
Romania	276,400
Russia	1,255,000
Saudi Arabia	120,900
Singapore	176,500
Slovakia	39,100
Slovenia	108,400
South Africa	104,800
Spain	23,600
Thailand	39,900
Turkey	155,600
UAE	273,600
Ukraine	407,300
Uruguay	15,600
USA	15,000
Yemen	25,700
Zimbabwe	36,300

1996–97—DMAF Expenditure

£

Country	*MOD Subsidy*
Albania	30,900
Bahrain	156,200
Baltic States	572,500
Barbados	196,000
Belarus	52,600
Belize	502,100
Brazil	4,560
Bulgaria	66,900
Chile	920,110
Czech Republic	148,800
Egypt	67,780
Finland	45,120
Georgia	12,900
Greece	84,710

1996–97—DMAF Expenditure

£

Country	*MOD Subsidy*
Hungary	43,000
India	43,680
Indonesia	1,675,280
Ireland	24,240
Jamaica	35,270
Jordan	156,570
Kenya	138,225
South Korea	53,340
Kuwait	2,570
Macedonia	31,200
Malaysia	164,390
Moldova	30,910
Morocco	33,590
Nepal	102,800
Oman	1,594,860
Pakistan	97,490
Philippines	20,000
Poland	47,700
Portugal	40,110
Romania	89,000
Russia	1,365,000
Saudi Arabia	9,210
Slovakia	33,500
Slovenia	29,300
South Africa	80,740
Spain	32,760
Thailand	57,760
Turkey	108,740
UAE	105,920
Ukraine	251,400
Zimbabwe	40,610

1995–96—DMAF Expenditure

£

Country	*MOD Subsidy*
Albania	18,500
Bahrain	19,260
Baltic States	585,100
Barbados	761,260
Belize	834,930
Bulgaria	27,800
Chile	316,630
Czech Republic	100,200
Dominica	15,570
Egypt	73,660
Greece	39,900
Grenada	16,490
Hungary	18,500
Indonesia	691,880
Jamaica	12,285
Jordan	60,390
Kenya	95,590
Macedonia	9,300
Malaysia	188,780
Morocco	26,170
Nepal	91,040
New Zealand	19,835
Oman	749,570
Poland	123,500
Portugal	40,000
Romania	27,800
Russia	630,000
Slovakia	37,100
Slovenia	9,300
Spain	9,385
St. Kitts and Nevis	15,570
St. Vincent	3,970
Thailand	95,610

1995–96—DMAF Expenditure

£

Country	*MOD Subsidy*
Turkey	58,825
UAE	54,990
Ukraine	142,600

Defence Export Sales Organisation

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what role the Defence Export Sales Organisation has in co-ordinating defence sales promotions with the Defence Military Assistance Fund. [63862]

Mr. Spellar: I will write to the hon. and learned Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Defence Diplomacy Mission

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what the budget is for the Defence Diplomacy Mission. [63863]

Mr. George Robertson: The Defence Diplomacy Mission is funded either by those Top Level Budget Holders responsible for specific activities or from the Defence Military Assistance Fund (DMAF). Figures on the former are not separately identified. The DMAF budget for 1998–99 is some £11 million, of which about £7 million is allocated to activities which now fall within the Defence Diplomacy Mission.

The increases we intend to make to the DMAF of around £5 million next year and up to £15 million in the two subsequent years, will also be used largely for Defence Diplomacy-related activities.

Bosnia

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what Christmas season entertainment he is arranging for the troops in Bosnia. [63909]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The principal Christmas entertainment provided for troops in Bosnia this year was a Combined Services Entertainment show which ran from 27 November to 4 December. It played at all major sites and all troops had the opportunity to see it. In addition to this, the British Forces Broadcasting Service will be broadcasting Christmas messages and conducting a radio link with families. There will also be a Christmas delivery of library books and the Service Sound and Vision Corporation are donating videos.

Units will also be arranging their own activities such as Christmas lunches and carol services. In addition, all troops will be given extra telephone time free of charge over the holiday period.

Services Personnel

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many *(a)* men and *(b)* women are currently serving in the (i) Army, (ii) Royal Airforce and (iii) Royal Navy. [64391]

Mr. Spellar: The number of men and women serving in the UK Regular Armed Forces on 1 November 1998, were:

	Men	*Women*	*Total*
Naval Service	40,668	3,302	43,970
Army	102,174	7,673	109,847
Royal Air Force	50,351	5,073	55,424
Total	193,193	16,048	209,241

These figures do not include the 4,512 personnel serving in the Royal Irish Regiment (men 4,072, women 440), or the number of Gurkhas totalling 3,578.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what conclusions his Department has drawn from the consequences of the explosion at Bhopal as regards the results of bombing chemical and biological weapons facilities. [62662]

Mr. Doug Henderson: The accidental explosion at a chemical factory in Bhopal, India in 1984 provided a large amount of information on the dangers in the storage of very large quantities of toxic chemicals, and on the possible consequences of the destruction, by accident or otherwise, of such storage facilities.

We advise caution, however, before this information is directly applied to other scenarios. In particular, we do not consider the information on Bhopal forms a suitable basis from which to construct predictions of the consequences of bombing of chemical or biological weapons facilities.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what estimate he has made of the likely target accuracy in possible bombing campaigns in Iraq. [62656]

Mr. George Robertson: I am not prepared to discuss detailed operational issues under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. However, I can say that only precision guided weaponry would be used.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans there are to ensure the safety of those with diplomatic status in Baghdad in the event of a bombing campaign. [62657]

Mr. George Robertson: I am not prepared to discuss detailed operational issues under exemption 1 of the Code of Practice on Access to Government Information. I can say, however, that all relevant factors are taken into account in selecting targets.

PRIME MINISTER

Ministerial Visits

12. **Mr. Bob Russell:** To ask the Prime Minister what plans he has to make an official visit to East Anglia. [62734]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so, but I hope to be able to pay a visit in the future.

14. **Mrs. Ann Winterton:** To ask the Prime Minister when he next intends to pay an official visit to the Congleton constituency. [62736]

The Prime Minister: I have no immediate plans to do so.

Engagements

Sir Peter Tapsell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 16 December. [63664]

The Prime Minister: This morning I attended a meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party and had meetings with Ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House I will have further such meetings later today.

Homosexual Age of Consent

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Prime Minister how many letters he has received since 2 May 1997 *(a)* in favour of and *(b)* opposed to lowering the age of consent for homosexual acts to 16 years; and how many replies have been sent in a standard form. [64278]

The Prime Minister: Since 2 May 1997 I have received over 3,500 letters on this subject, the large majority of which were opposed to lowering the age of consent for homosexual acts to 16 years. All would have been acknowledged by No. 10 and almost all would have received a reply from the relevant Department which made clear the Government's position on this matter.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the political consequences in Iraq of removing Saddam Hussein from power, with particular reference to possible fragmentation. [62658]

The Prime Minister: I am aware of my hon. Friend's concerns about the possibility of fragmentation if the Iraqi regime should fall.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the likely impact of a bombing campaign in Iraq on the strength of Saddam Hussein's support in *(a)* Iraq, *(b)* the rest of the Arab world and *(c)* the rest of the Islamic world. [62659]

The Prime Minister: I am not prepared to speculate about the possibility of military action or its possible consequences. The statement on 12 November by the Damascus Declaration countries made clear that the Arab world holds Saddam Hussein responsible for the consequences of his actions and the Gulf Co-operation Council summit earlier this month reinforced the message that the Government of Iraq were responsible for the suffering of the Iraqi people. The Iraqi people would no doubt express similar views, if they were allowed to do so.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on the reasons for the length of time so far taken by UNSCOM to fulfil its mission. [62663]

The Prime Minister: UNSCOM is mandated under United Nations Security Council Resolution 687 to ensure that Iraq gives up its weapons of mass destruction (WMD). With full co-operation from Iraq, UNSCOM's work could have been completed very quickly. Instead, Iraq has chosen to attempt to retain its WMD capability at all costs. Its behaviour towards UNSCOM has been marked by persistent duplicity, evasion and confrontation.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will list the current officials of UNSCOM, indicating their *(a)* nationality, *(b)* salaries and *(c)* dates of appointment. [62664]

The Prime Minister: We do not keep this information. This is a matter for UNSCOM.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what steps the Government will take to ensure that documents requested by UNSCOM exist before using the Iraqi Government's refusal to provide them as the reason for a military attack. [62665]

The Prime Minister: I am satisfied that UNSCOM would not have requested these documents without good grounds to believe they existed. I will not speculate on when and if military action will be necessary. I have made clear that I am watching Iraq's behaviour closely against a range of criteria. Iraq's response to UNSCOM's requested for documents is not a good start.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister what assessment he has made of the observations by Mr. Denis Halliday, the UN's former humanitarian co-ordinator, in Middle East International on 13 November, concerning the deaths of children as a result of the UN sanctions against Iraq. [62668]

The Prime Minister: Like Mr. Halliday, we deeply regret the suffering of the Iraqi people and we agree with him that it is unfortunate that the UN has been obliged to sustain a sanctions regime against Iraq for so long. But we reject claims that the Iraqi people are suffering because of sanctions.

The international community has done all it can to protect the Iraqi people from the effects of sanctions. It is the Iraqi Government, by consistently seeking to thwart these efforts in an attempt to bring pressure for sanctions to be lifted before it has complied with its obligations, who bear responsibility for the suffering of the Iraqi people. The latest report by the UN Special Rapporteur Mr. Max van der Stoel into the human rights situation in Iraq also holds Iraq primarily responsible for the precarious food and health situation in Iraq.

Council of Europe and WEU

Mr. Terry Davis: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library the latest Information Bulletin on the activities of the United Kingdom delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Assembly of Western European Union covering the period May to September. [64281]

The Prime Minister: I have done so today.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

Shipping Policy Paper

Mr. Ivan Henderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects to publish his shipping policy paper. [64267]

Mr. Prescott: I have today published the Government's shipping policy paper "British Shipping: Charting a new course" and I am arranging for copies to be placed in the Library of both Houses.

The policy document sets out a long-term, integrated strategy for British shipping in partnership between Government and the shipping industry, including the trade unions. Drawing on the report of the Shipping Working Group which I set up late last year, the paper sets out 33 inter-related actions designed to develop the UK's maritime skills; secure British seafaring employment; enhance the UK's attractiveness to shipping enterprises; and gain safety and environmental benefits.

Speed Reduction Measures

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to encourage the introduction of speed reduction measures on UK roads. [62934]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Department has recently started a review of speed policy taking account of its effects on safety, the environment, the economy, and the quality of life.

The Department already issues advice to local highway authorities on the type of speed reducing measures that are available to them and best practice on their use. We shall also shortly be introducing legislation freeing authorities from the requirement to seek central Government consent to make 20 mph speed limits; advice about introducing such limits will stress the need to ensure the required reduction in traffic speed is achieved by making the limits self enforcing through the use of speed reducing features where necessary.

Officials from the relevant Departments are discussing detailed methods for funding the operation of speed cameras from fine income.

Northern Line

Sir Sydney Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement about the delay in providing new trains on the London Underground Northern Line and what is the expected date when the trains will be operational; and if he will list the financial penalties imposed for the late delivery of the trains. [63402]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Underground and ALSTOM are working together to introduce the new Northern Line trains as quickly as possible. The first of the new trains entered passenger service on 12 June 1998 and London Underground expect that a full Northern Line service will be provided with new trains by early Autumn 1999.

Under the terms of the contract, ALSTOM is liable to pay liquidated damages to London Underground in respect of delays in the delivery of the new trains. The amount is commercially confidential.

Young People (Housing)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assistance his Department gives to local authorities to enable them to help children between the ages of 16 and 18 years to enter into tenancies for homes of their own; and what guidance it gives local authorities on this subject. [63468]

Mr. Raynsford: My Department does not provide any specific assistance to local housing authorities to enable them to allocate tenancies in self-contained accommodation to 16 to 18-year-olds.

The Housing Act 1996 requires authorities to allocate social housing on the basis of housing need. A person aged 16 to 18 with dependent children would have to be given priority under an authority's allocation scheme. However, it is the practice of many local authorities to include under 18-year-olds on their housing registers only if the social services authority supports the application or if an adult is prepared to act as a guarantor for any tenancy allocated to the young person. 16 to 18 year olds who are unintentionally homeless and considered vulnerable for the purpose of the homelessness legislation are also required to be given priority under an allocation scheme. My Department's Code of Guidance on the Allocation of Housing and Homelessness, which is currently being revised, provides general guidance to authorities on these matters.

Electric Cars

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *118*, on the Energy Savings Trust, what was the value of the grants awarded for the purchase or conversion of electric vehicles. [64142]

Mr. Meale: The Energy Saving Trust has provided grants totalling £501,500 for the purchase or conversion of electric vehicles.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many grants, and of what value, have been awarded as part of the Powershift programme to overseas-based companies for the conversion of vehicles to run on electricity. [64005]

Mr. Meale: No grants have been provided to companies not registered in the UK for the purchase or conversion of vehicles to run on electricity. One grant of £120,000 was made available to a company registered outside the UK for the purchase of 6 electric buses for use in a demonstration project in Merseyside.

Valuation Tribunals

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many staff were employed by valuation tribunals in England on *(a)* 1 May 1997, *(b)* 1 April 1998 and *(c)* 1 December 1998. [63691]

Mr. Raynsford: The number of full time equivalent staff employed by valuation tribunals in England on the dates were as follows:

1 May 1997: 242

1 April 1998: 225

1 December 1998: 211.

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many offices served valuation tribunals in England on *(a)* 1 May 1997, *(b)* 1 April 1998 and *(c)* 1 December 1998. [63692]

Mr. Raynsford: The number of offices serving valuation tribunals in England on the dates were as follows:

1 May 1997: 38

1 April 1998: 36

1 December 1998: 34.

Mr. Borrow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many *(a)* staff and *(b)* offices he expects to be required to serve valuation tribunals in England on (i) 1 April 1999 and (ii) 1 April 2000. [63690]

Mr. Raynsford: Staffing levels are primarily determined by the appeals workload. The staffing complement as at 1 April 1998, which has generally been retained for the financial year commencing 1 April 1999, is for 180 staff. Continuing reductions towards that level are dependent on local decisions by the valuation tribunals and their staff. The staffing complement from 1 April 2000 will need to take account of estimates of the number of appeals likely to arise from the non-domestic revaluation in that year.

The longer term aim is to move to a structure of 14 administrative units to serve valuation tribunals in England, with one or at most two offices per unit. Progress by the stated dates will depend on discussions with the individual valuation tribunals in each of the administrative units. We expect there to be at most 32 offices by 1 April 1999. It is impossible to be precise about the figure on 1 April 2000, because this will depend on progress locally, but it will probably number 30 or less.

London Government Headquarters

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions under what circumstances new or revised bids can be submitted for shortlisting for the headquarters of London government. [64085]

Mr. Raynsford: There has been a careful and open selection and short-listing process, which has reduced an initial 55 locations down to seven, and then to a short-list of two. I expect to announce a decision in the new year.

Jubilee Line Extension

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the latest estimated total cost for the construction of the Jubilee Line extension; and from what sources the funds will be derived. [63697]

Ms Glenda Jackson: London Transport review Jubilee Line Extension cost estimates regularly. The latest issued estimate of final cost was £2.85 billion (derived from a review in August). LT is currently undertaking a cost review, in the light of the rephased programme for line opening.

The majority of the project (some £2 billion) has been funded by ring-fenced Government grant. Private sector contributions have also been secured from the developers of Canary Wharf, and British Gas. The remainder is being funded from within LT's overall finances. It is the responsibility of LT to control costs on the project. JLE costs are taken into account by the Government in deciding on the level of overall funding for LT.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63923]

Mr. Meale: The Department carries out public opinion research, television, radio and press advertising and direct mailings in support of publicity campaigns. The total expenditure since May 1997 is £10,630,000. The breakdown of that expenditure is as follows:

£

Project	*Expenditure* [1]
(a) Public opinion research on DETR campaigns	560,000
(b) Television advertising	6,500,000
Radio advertising	1,560,000
Press advertising	1,840,000
(c) Mailings in support of campaigns and consultation exercises	[2]170,000

[1] To the nearest £10,000

[2] Includes postage

South West Regional Planning Conference

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what powers he has to override decisions made by the South West regional planning conference. [64147]

Mr. Caborn: Under the new arrangements for the preparation of regional planning guidance set out in the planning policy statement "Planning for the Communities of the Future" (Cmnd 3885), Regional Planning Conferences will have greater responsibility for determining the most sustainable way of meeting housing needs in their region. It is intended that this should be a more inclusive process, Conference will work together with the Government Office, the Regional Development Agency and other regional stakeholders to produce draft Regional Planning Guidance. Increased legitimacy and transparency of the Regional Planning Guidance will be achieved through new procedures for a public examination before an independent panel. The panel report will be taken into account by the Secretary of State in finalising the regional planning guidance.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given the South West regional planning conference on the effect of the future household projections on each county in the region. [64146]

Mr. Caborn: As indicated in the policy statement, "Planning for the Communities of the Future" (Cmnd 3885) we need to provide enough housing to help meet the housing objective of offering everyone the opportunity of a decent home and so promote social cohesion, well-being and self-dependence. Achieving sustainable development means addressing economic, social and environmental objectives equally, both for present and future generations. The Government's objective is to provide sustainable solutions which will help ensure that new housing will, by its nature and location, enhance the quality of the environment. The household projections are the starting point for assessing housing requirements and local authorities will need to be realistic in the assumptions that they make about the number of households likely to form and how they should be accommodated.

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given the South West regional planning conference on how to meet the needs assumed by his projections for future household numbers. [64145]

Mr. Caborn: The Government's approach to offering everyone the opportunity of a decent home is set out in its response (Cmnd 4080) to the tenth report from the Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs Committee, Session 1997–98, on Housing and the policy statement "Planning for the Communities of the Future" (Cmnd 3885). In considering the broad distribution of housing within the region the South West Regional Planning Conference is also expected to have regard to the Government's policy for urban regeneration, transport and sustainable development and to the Regional Development Agency's regional economic strategy.

South-west Region (Projected Households)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has received regarding his projections for the south-west region future household numbers. [64144]

Mr. Caborn: None. Work is currently underway on the 1996 based household projections, which will be issued next Spring.

South-west Development (Brown-field Land)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will allow local authorities in the south-west to postpone development plans until regional planning guidance is revised following the result of his survey of brown-field land. [64149]

Mr. Caborn: No. The importance for the plan-led system of keeping plans up to date was emphasised in the statement on Modernising planning, published on 15 January. Under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990, as amended, local planning authorities, in preparing their development plans, must have regard to any regional or strategic planning guidance issued by the Secretary of State, as well as to current national policies and other matters. Therefore, where development plans are being replaced or altered in the short term, they should continue to have regard to existing regional guidance, including, where specified, the housing provision figures.

South-west Region (Housing)

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what guidance he has given local authorities in the south-west region on sustainable means of meeting the housing needs of their community. [64148]

Mr. Caborn: The policy statement "Planning for the Communities of the Future" (Cmnd 3885) set out the Government's broad approach. The consultation document, "Opportunities for Change", issued in February set out four broad objectives on which the Government's vision of sustainable development is based and what needs to be done to put it into practice. Further guidance is set out in "Planning for Sustainable Development: Towards Better Practice", published by my Department in October.

Local Planning Authorities

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to assist local planning authorities in delivering more sustainable patterns of development. [64150]

Mr. Caborn: In October my Department issued a guide to local planning authorities entitled "Planning for Sustainable Development: Towards Better Practice". This document has been well-received as a source of practical ideas about how sustainability principles can be implemented on the ground.

My Department's series of Planning Policy Guidance notes (PPGs) advise local planning authorities on how they should draw up their plans to ensure more sustainable patterns of development. We intend to issue shortly a new draft PPG11 on regional planning guidance. This will advise the regional planning bodies that the promotion of sustainable development should be a central feature of RPG. Moreover, we will also shortly be issuing a full revision of PPG12 (Development Plans) for public consultation. This will include a section devoted to the relationship between the content of development plans, for which local planning authorities are responsible, and sustainable development.

Devon County Structure Plan

Mr. Harvey: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what response he has made to the draft Devon County Structure Plan. [64152]

Mr. Caborn: We have carefully considered the proposed modifications to the Devon Structure Plan First Review which were published on 28 September and have made objections to a number of policies that appear to conflict with national guidance. A number of objections have been resolved and the extant objections relate to policies S6, C7, C12, C23, T14, H1, E8 and T12.

The objection to policy HI stated:

"There is no clear justification for a reduction in the overall provision for housing, below that recommended by the Panel. There appears to be no justification for reducing provision in anticipation

of a reduction in vacancy rates, having regard to the Panel's findings. Taking account of the panels findings, there does not appear to be a sound basis for projecting a lower level of net in-migration and household formation and that contained in the DETR 1992 based household projections.

"From a regional perspective, the district distribution is in part consequential on the county provision. However, the reduced allocations for Plymouth and Exeter (compared to those recommended by the Panel) appear to conflict with national and regional objectives in PPG13 para 3.2 and RPG10 para 6.7 and 'Planning for the Communities of the Future' para 58".

Concessionary Fares (Pensioners)

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will issue guidance to local authorities, transport authorities and public transport bodies pending the introduction of legislation to encourage greater consistency in concessionary fares schemes for pensioners. [63998]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We announced our intention to legislate for a statutory minimum concessionary fare scheme for pensioners in our White Paper "A New Deal for Transport", the minimum scheme will entail half fares, on purchase of a £5 annual bus pass. Meanwhile, decisions on concessionary fare schemes will remain for individual local authorities. I have no plans to issue guidance to them, but I should, of course, be glad if those authorities who at present offer less generous schemes were to implement the proposed minimum in advance of legislation.

Voluntary and Community Transport

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library the summary of the findings of the National Review of Voluntary and Community Transport as presented to delegates at the annual community transport conference. [63813]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The summary is an informal document meant only to stimulate discussion at the recent Conference. I will send a personal copy to my hon. Friend. I will ensure that copies of the final report—which is due early in the New Year—are placed in the Library.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what increased provision was made in the local government financial settlement for each local authority to manage current and improved public access to the countryside. [63832]

Ms Armstrong: The need for revenue expenditure by local authorities on public rights of way is taken into account, along with other spending pressures and the scope for efficiencies, in the local government finance settlement.

The Government recognise that their proposals for increasing public access to the countryside are likely to have cost implications for local authorities, and will take these into account in future financial settlements.

Countryside (Public Access)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will publish the response to the Government's consultation on improving public access to the countryside; and if he will list the main concerns raised by local authorities. [63831]

Mr. Meale: I refer my hon. Friend to the answers given by my right hon. Friend, the Minister for the Environment, to the hon. Member for South Suffolk (Mr. Yeo) on 27 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *103*, and to the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *672*. My Department's analysis of responses to the consultation paper, "Access to the Open Countryside in England and Wales," will summarise the key issues raised by respondents, including the representations made by local authorities.

Leaseholders

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate how many dwellings in which the household is headed by a person aged over 65 years are leasehold; and how many of these are *(a)* flats and *(b)* houses. [64003]

Mr. Raynsford: The estimates[1] in the table are taken from the Department's Survey of English Housing for 1997–98.

Households owning a lease

Thousands

Age of head of household	*Type of accommodation* *House*	*Flat*	*Total*
Under 65 years	668	691	1,359
Over 65 years	163	258	422
Total	831	949	1,780

Note:

[1] Like all estimates from sample surveys, these figures are subject to sampling variability

Mr. O'Hara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what percentage of all leaseholders are aged over 65 years. [64002]

Mr. Raynsford: Estimates[1] from the Department's Survey of English Housing show that in 1997–98, twenty four per cent. (24%) of leaseholders were aged over 65 years.

Notes:

[1] Like all estimates from sample surveys, these figures are subject to sample variability.

Trains (First Aid Equipment)

Mr. Sheerman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions he has had with train operators regarding access to first aid equipment on trains. [63811]

Ms Glenda Jackson: None. The provisions of the Health and Safety (First Aid) Regulations 1981 (HSFAR), a relevant statutory provision of the Health and Safety at Work etc Act, 1974, which apply to train operating companies, require employers to provide access to adequate first aid facilities for their employees in the workplace. All trains must therefore be fitted with first aid equipment which on modern trains is located in the drivers cab and on older trains in the guards van.

There is no legislation which requires train operating companies to provide first aid equipment for use by the public. It is a matter for each train operating company to decide what first aid facilities it makes available to the public. In practice, first aid equipment provided under the HSFAR 1981 is available to train passengers.

Kyoto Protocol

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many countries are required to ratify the Kyoto Climate Change Convention Protocol for it to enter into force; and which countries have done so to date. [63775]

Mr. Meacher: The Kyoto Protocol to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change will enter into force on the ninetieth day after the date on which not less than 55 Parties to the Convention incorporating Annex I Parties (i.e. developed countries) which accounted in total for at least 55 per cent. of the total carbon dioxide emissions for 1990 from that group have deposited their instruments of ratification, acceptance, approval or accession. To date, Fiji and Tuvalu have ratified the Kyoto Protocol.

Hazardous Waste Landfill Sites

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the analysis in *The Lancet* of 8 August 1998 concerning the risk of congenital anomalies near hazardous waste landfill sites in Europe, including the United Kingdom. [63903]

Mr. Meale: The Government would be most concerned if a casual link was established between congenital anomalies and hazardous waste landfill sites. The study reported in *The Lancet* did not establish cause and effect, but concluded that there was a need for further study. The commentary in *The Lancet* on the study pointed out that the lack of adequate exposure information made the present results difficult to interpret.

My Department has nevertheless been looking at the results of the study very carefully with the Department of Health and the Environment Agency. The Small Area Health Statistics Unit (SAHSU) at Imperial College has been commissioned by the Government to carry out a substantial survey of health effects around landfill sites, including congenital malformations. This work will take at least two years to complete. In addition, my Department and the Department of Health have asked the Institute for Environment and Health (IEH) to arrange a one-day meeting of invited experts to discuss *The Lancet* report, to identify gaps in the knowledge base and to explore priorities for future Government research. We anticipate that a range of expertise will be represented at the meeting including environmental epidemiology, reproductive toxicology, landfill technology and exposure assessment.

Radioactive Discharges

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what representations he has made to secure the OSPAR agreed cessation of radioactive discharges from the reprocessing plant at Cap de La Hague in France. [64104]

Mr. Meacher: It is for France, as an OSPAR Contracting Party, to decide how it will implement the undertakings made at the OSPAR Ministerial Meeting last July. I understand that the French Government are carrying out a full review of discharge authorisations for the La Hague site and that they expect to make an announcement shortly.

Dr. Desmond Turner: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on progress towards the cessation of *(a)* liquid and *(b)* gaseous radioactive discharges from (i) nuclear reprocessing plants and (ii) nuclear generating stations in accordance with the OSPAR agreement. [64103]

Mr. Meacher: In accordance with the undertakings made at the OSPAR Ministerial Meeting last July, the Government are working towards achieving further substantial reductions or elimination of discharges of radioactive substances. UK nuclear operators will be producing twenty-year strategies to show options for reducing discharges, by 2020, to levels which add negligible amounts to historic concentrations in the marine environment.

The Environment Agency has completed its consideration of BNFL's applications to vary radioactive discharges from the Sellafield site and the Agency's draft decisions are being considered by Ministers. Requests for the applications to be "called-in" for the Secretary of State's own determination are also being considered and decisions will be announced as soon as possible.

School Playing Fields

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what measures his Department proposes to meet the Government's pledge to stop the loss of school playing fields. [64387]

Mr. Caborn: We have published The Town and Country Planning (Playing Fields)(England) Direction 1998 which is one of the key measures in a co-ordinated approach between my Department, the Department of Education and Employment, and the Department of Culture, Media and Sport to stop the loss of playing fields. The Direction requires local planning authorities to notify my Department of planning applications where they wish to grant planning permission, but where the English Sports Council advises against the development, because there is, or the development would result in, a deficiency in playing field provision for schools or the wider community in the area.

This Direction applies to local authority-owned playing fields and all others which are currently used, or which have been used in the past five years, by educational institutions. The effect of the Direction will be to give the Secretary of State the opportunity to decide whether to call-in a notified planning applications for his own determination, or leave the matter for the local planning authority to decide. Taken together with measures by the Department for Education and Employment to limit the sale of playing fields, these new controls will help to ensure that playing fields which schools and local communities need are not lost for ever.

Homelessness

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many and what percentage of schemes supported initially by section 180 and section 73 grants have continued to operate after the grants were tapered to 0 per cent. in each of the last five years. [64215]

Mr. Raynsford: The section 180 (formerly section 73) grant programme run by my Department provides grants to voluntary sector organisations concerned with homelessness. The grants are provided on a tapered basis, initially for up to three years to allow organisations to set up new projects to prevent and tackle single homelessness. All organisations are made aware of the tapered and time-limited nature of the grant when they apply, and are expected to have a fund-raising strategy in place to secure the continuation of the project. This approach allows more new projects around the country to benefit from grants than would otherwise be possible. The taper has been applied flexibly and many organisations have benefited from grant for periods well in excess of three years. This year 79 of the 205 projects in receipt of grant have been funded for between four and eight years. All aspects of project performance are considered when deciding whether funding should be offered beyond the usual three year period.

Detailed records are not kept on whether projects continue to operate when they are no longer in receipt of section 180 grant.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* total expenditure and *(b)* expenditure by programme by his Department in Scotland on areas covered by the exception under (i) E.1, (ii) E.2 and (iii) E.3 of Head E in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998. [63805]

Mr. Meale *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Expenditure by the Department in 1997–98 on research and development, grants and consultancies related to road safety, which is the subject of the exception listed in Head E1 of Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998, was £4.2m. The Department does not record separately how much of this expenditure takes place in Scotland.

In 1997–98, the Department undertook the following programme expenditure[1] on grants relating to railway services which are the subject of exceptions listed in Head E2 of Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998;

£ million

DETR expenditure	*Total GB*	*Scotland*
Payments by the Office of Passenger Rail Franchising to train operating companies	1,425	[2]136
Freight Facilities Grant	8	[3]nil
Track Access Grant	21	not separately recorded

[1] These figures include any expenditure incurred in relation to those areas listed in Schedule 5, Head E2 (a-c), to which the exception does not apply, on which separate information is not recorded.
[2] Payments made to Scotrail.
[3] Freight Facilities Grants in Scotland paid by Scottish Office.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list *(a)* total expenditure and *(b)* expenditure by programme over £50,000 by his Department in Scotland on areas covered by each exception under Head D in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998. [63798]

Mr. Meale: *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Expenditure by the Department on the regulation of the energy supply industry under Part 1 of the Environment Protection Act 1990 and the Radioactive Substances Act 1993, which are the subject of the exceptions listed in Heads D1, D2, D3 and D4 of the Scotland Act 1998, is not separately recorded. The Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions is not responsible for funding the relevant regulatory authorities in Scotland.

Expenditure by the Department in 1997–98 on the Energy Saving Trust, which is the subject of the exception listed in Head D5 of Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998, was £19.7m, of which £1.23m was expenditure in Scotland.

Quayside Guided Bus Transit System

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has given his approval of funding towards the Quayside Guided Bus Transit System in the City of Newcastle upon Tyne; and if he will make a statement. [64424]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The details of the annual Local Transport Capital Settlement for 1999–2000 are being announced tomorrow. Information about allocations to individual local authorities, and to passenger transport authorities, will be sent directly to Members of Parliament.

Housing Capital Resources

Helen Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he intends to make an announcement about the distribution to local authorities of housing capital resources for 1999–2000. [64485]

Ms Armstrong: Details of housing capital allocations for local authorities for 1999–2000 will be announced tomorrow. I am arranging for tables giving individual Housing Investment Programme and Capital Receipts Initiative allocations to be placed in the Library of the House. These tables will also show the performance band in which each authority has been placed.

Flooding

Ms Keeble: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will provide financial assistance to Cherwell District Council and Melton Borough Council under the Bellwin scheme for costs incurred following the severe flooding on the weekend of 9 to 12 April 1998. [64486]

Ms Armstrong: I am satisfied that financial assistance under the Bellwin scheme is justified in the case of Cherwell and Melton councils, given the exceptional nature of the floods and the damage caused. Schemes will, therefore, be established under section 155 of the Local Government and Housing Act 1989. Grant will be paid to each authority to cover 85 per cent. of eligible costs above a threshold and which have been incurred by the authority in dealing with the flooding.

British Board of Agrément

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has reached conclusions on the status of the British Board of Agrément; and if he will make a statement. [64559]

Mr. Raynsford: On 3 February 1998, *Official Report*, column *637*, I announced to the House that a Financial Management and Policy Review of the British Board of Agrément (BBA) would be carried out this year.

The first stage of the Review—the Prior Options Review—was completed by consultants last July. I have since considered the consultants' report very carefully, and having discussed this with the Chairman of the BBA Council, I have reached a number of conclusions:

- the BBA provides an essential service to the construction industry, and should be encouraged to continue to provide that service;
- the BBA no longer needs to be constrained by the Government rules and procedures necessary for Non Departmental Public Bodies and should have the commercial freedoms necessary to allow it to develop its business; and
- in partnership with Government, the BBA should continue to promote Agrément and European Technical Approvals in accordance with a Memorandum of Understanding to be drawn up by my Department and the BBA.

To these ends, I propose to invite the Council to amend the Company's Memorandum and Articles of Association so that the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions can relinquish many of the powers he currently has. The BBA will retain its existing status as a Company limited by guarantee under the Companies Act.

In order to emphasise the importance to Government of the BBA, I propose that the Secretary of State should be represented on its ruling Council, and, in order to protect previous investments of public funds, that he retains controls over the disposal of the Company or its assets, through specific clawback provisions. Other commercial and organisational issues should, rightly, be passed to the BBA Council to decide. The Secretary of State will cease to make appointments to the Council, but will be consulted upon them.

As part of the process to promote the BBA, I have asked them to commission a survey of the products market to assist in drawing up a strategy for future development of business opportunities.

Local Transport Infrastructure

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will announce the allocation of capital resources for expenditure on local transport infrastructure. [64630]

Dr. Reid: Details of the allocations to local highway authorities and passenger transport authorities in England for capital expenditure on their transport infrastructure in 1999–2000 will be placed in the Library of the House at 10.00 am on Thursday 17 December. Information about allocations to individual authorities will be sent directly to Members of Parliament.

Channel Tunnel Rail Link

Mr. Shaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when decisions will be issued to applicants under the scheme of redress for extreme and exceptional hardship for those affected by blight from Channel Tunnel Rail Link route options between 1990 and 1994. [64631]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I am today announcing that 28 applicants demonstrated that they suffered extreme and exceptional hardship as a result of past CTRL blight and will be receiving £10,000 each. This is an *ex gratia* scheme which is additional to normal compensation arrangements for those directly affected by the CTRL. The scheme originated from a finding of maladministration against the then Department of Transport by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration.

Rural Bus Challenge

Mr. Blizzard: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will make an announcement on this year's Rural Bus Challenge competition. [64632]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The schemes listed have been approved for grant under this year's Rural Bus Challenge. This follows careful consideration of the 214 bids received from local authorities. The value of the bids totalled over £41.5 million, in comparison with the £11.4 million available for grant. A Special Grant Report under Section 88b of the Local Government Finance Act 1988 will be put forward for Parliamentary approval as soon as possible in the new year.

Local authority	*Total cost (£)*	*Title of bid approved*
Bath and North East Somerset	34,600	Rural Bus Stop Lighting
Buckinghamshire	100,500	Community minibus in the Winslow area
Cheshire	16,904	Community Transport in Chester district
Derbyshire	800,000	Southern Derbyshire rural access initiative
Durham	592,000	Public transport access for coalfields communities
East Sussex	259,500	Accessible buses for Multi-purpose use
Essex	803,100	Flexible bus network for the Dengie peninsular
Gloucestershire	25,000	Provision of Rural Transport brokerage facility
Greater Manchester	384,500	Provision of taxi/bus interchange facilities at 3 rural railway stations
Hampshire	266,500	Longdendale taxi-sharing scheme
Hereford	8,400	The New Forest minibus brokerage project
Hertfordshire	186,490	Enhancement of existing community transport schemes
	176,000	Dial-a-ride evening services
Kent	19,000	Improvements to information provision on the internet
	40,000	Rural bus stop information strategy
Lancashire	140,000	Upgraded rural routes and real time information
	203,750	The Clitheroes interchange demonstration project
	277,856	The rural quality bus initiative

Local authority	Total cost (£)	Title of bid approved
Leicestershire	69,600	East Leicestershire Taxibus
Lincolnshire	1,219,990	Making the connection—a package of improvements
Medway	232,500	Real time information and bus priority through vehicle detection
	6,500	Information upgrade for rural services
Norfolk	444,500	Norfolk coast strategy
	130,000	Flexible feeder services
Northamptonshire	10,000	Mobile libraries travel guide
	35,600	Brackley-Banbury Quality Bus Partnership
	20,000	Safety for women scheme
	180,000	Dial-a-ride: South Northamptonshire
Northumberland	16,850	Development of the postbus network
Nottinghamshire	1,150,000	Worksop area travel choice project
Peterborough	74,250	Rural Taxibus
Somerset	130,000	The Mendips flexible bus project
	1,004	Exmoor community transport radio
South Gloucestershire	612,000	Community transport co-ordination centres
South Yorkshire	5,000	Improvements to bus turnaround
	15,000	Western Barnsley—vehicle radio communications project
	3,200	Refurbishment of accessible vehicle—Western Barnsley
	4,500	Refurbishment of accessible vehicle—Eastern Barnsley
Staffordshire	175,000	Rural Taxibus and interchange project
Tyne and Wear	1,255,000	Rural Interchange points (package of measures)
Warrington	5,000	Increased use of social and community buses
West Berkshire	33,000	Voluntary bus escort project and co-ordinator
West Sussex (and Surrey)	248,600	Demanding Public Transport
West Yorkshire	364,500	Rural bus service improvements in Denby Dale
Wiltshire	463,000	Wiltshire Wigglybus project
York	180,000	Rural bus interchange at park and ride facilities
Total	11,418,694	

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

University for Industry

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what proposals he has to allow the University for Industry to be a direct provider of further education and higher education courses; and if resources for such provision will come directly from FEFC and HEFC budgets. [61826]

Mr. Mudie: The University for Industry will be launched nationally in the year 2000. There are no plans for UfI to be a direct learning provider but will rather act as a broker of learning opportunities. We expect the further and higher education sectors to make a major contribution to the UfI as a key part of the strategy to embed the Lifelong Learning culture.

It will be open to the Higher Education Funding Council England (HEFCE) and the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) to allocate places with accompanying funding to enable institutions to develop joint provision of learning opportunities with the UfI.

GCSEs

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what was the average number of hours per week spent teaching GCSE subjects by teachers, excluding head teachers and deputy headteachers, in LEA secondary schools in England. [62029]

Ms Estelle Morris: In 1996–97, in maintained secondary schools in England that had pupils in years 10 and 11, full-time teachers spent an average of 28 per cent. of the school week teaching years 10 and 11 in subjects which can be tested at GCSE, although not all such teaching will be for GCSE. For a school that has eight periods a day of 35 minutes each, this amounts to 6.5 hours a week.

Retraining

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to make further provision for retraining unemployed people between the age of 25 years and normal retirement age. [62781]

Mr. Mudie: The Government recognise the importance of the role played by training in helping unemployed adults back to work.

At present, learning by unemployed adults is supplied through Work Based Learning for Adults; the training option of New Deal 25+ which was introduced nationally from June 1998; further education; and the Single Regeneration Budget.

The Government continue to keep training for unemployed adults under review and is testing new ways in which training can be delivered in the future. These initiatives include the 25+ New Deal pilots which commenced in November, Employment Zones, Individual Learning Accounts and the University for Industry. Results from these are being carefully evaluated and those approaches we find most effective will be applied widely.

The future development of Work Based Learning for Adults is being considered as part of the TEC Review.

Departmental Papers (Schools Circulation)

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list all departmental papers circulated to schools since May 1997. [63060]

Mr. Charles Clarke *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* A list of material sent to schools by the Department of Education and Employment from 2 May 1997 to 12 December 1998 has been placed in the Library.

Of the 216 items sent to schools, 130 were sent to all schools over the 20-month period. The remainder had a more limited circulation. Since June 1998 schools have received material in regular batches which clearly indicate the priority of items. From 1 December batches only contain: guidance on legal changes, curriculum development material on key strategies such as literacy and numeracy, data collection and 2 page summaries of documents on key policy issues.

Further Education

Mr. Kidney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the proportions of each kind of assistance given to further education students out of access funds in the last financial year for which figures are available. [63470]

Mr. Mudie: Over £6 million of Further Education Access Funds were allocated in the following proportions in 1996–97 (the latest year for which figures are available):

Category	*Percentage of Access Fund allocated*
Fees	17.50
Books	7.35
Equipment	10.66
Accommodation	6.13
Childcare	23.03
Transport	25.87
Other	9.46

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what measures the Government are taking to promote access to further and higher education for young people with special educational needs. [63400]

Mr. Mudie: The Government's policies on widening participation and increasing access are intended to be inclusive and to benefit students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities as well as others.

The Secretary of State has asked the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) when allocating funds to institutions to take into account the additional costs of providing learning support for students with learning difficulties and disabilities and to monitor the provision made by institutions for disabled students. This was made clear in the grant letter of 8 December to HEFCE. Under the new higher education student support arrangements for 1998–99, Disabled Students' Allowances will no longer be means tested for disabled full time students and the amount students may claim has been increased.

In further education, the funding mechanism provides for additional support for students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities according to need. The grant letter to the Further Education Funding Council of 8 December noted that the FE capital element of the Comprehensive Spending Review (comprising £195 million in total) would enable colleges to make progress on disabled access in the context of the Government's commitment to comprehensive and enforceable civil rights.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many official visits *(a)* he and *(b)* the Ministers in his Department have made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997; and if he will list them. [64137]

Mr. Mudie: There have been no official visits to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997 by either my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State or any of his Ministers.

Higher Education Funding Council

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the administrative costs, as a percentage of the total budget, for *(a)* the Higher Education Funding Council, and *(b)* the Further Education Funding Council; and what is the national average for training and enterprise councils. [63270]

Mr. Mudie: The information that my hon. Friend has requested is listed below. All figures relate to the 1997–98 financial year, the last for which we have complete figures:

Higher Education Funding Council for England 0.29 per cent.

Further Education Funding Council 0.76 per cent.

Training and Enterprise Councils 13 per cent.

The figures for all three organisations are from their accounts.

The three figures are not comparable because of differences in responsibilities between the TECs, the HEFCE and the FEFC.

Specifically, the figure for TECs is much higher than either of the others because TECs are themselves directly involved in local business support and economic development.

Mixed Year Classes

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority how many Key Stage One and Key Stage Two pupils in maintained schools were being educated in the same class in January *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998. [63515]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 14 December]:* The information requested is shown in the following table:

Number of pupils in mixed year group classes. Maintained primary schools by Local Education Authority area, England—January 1998

Schools	*Amount*
Hartlepool	3,218
Middlesbrough	4,337
Redcar and Cleveland	5,388
Stockton-on-Tees	3,828
Darlington	2,146
Durham	15,901
Northumberland	6,741
Gateshead	4,442
Newcastle-upon-Tyne	4,753
North Tyneside	2,023
South Tyneside	1,582
Sunderland	3,490

Number of pupils in mixed year group classes. Maintained primary schools by Local Education Authority area, England—January 1998

Schools	Amount
Cheshire	32,527
Cumbria	16,125
Bolton	3,948
Bury	3,221
Manchester	6,380
Oldham	4,995
Rochdale	4,934
Salford	3,909
Stockport	5,799
Tameside	4,723
Trafford	3,532
Wigan	3,567
Lancashire	32,263
Knowsley	2,643
Liverpool	4,063
St. Helens	1,066
Sefton	3,995
Wirral	7,091
East Riding of Yorkshire	9,407
City of Kingston-Upon-Hull	7,227
North East Lincolnshire	3,603
North Lincolnshire	3,712
York	5,691
North Yorkshire	23,472
Barnsley	6,753
Doncaster	5,729
Rotherham	6,928
Sheffield	8,231
Bradford	10,614
Calderdale	7,685
Kirklees	12,318
Leeds	13,885
Wakefield	6,984
Derby	7,375
Derbyshire	27,527
Leicester city	7,785
Rutland	1,534
Leicestershire	19,379
Lincolnshire	24,491
Northamptonshire	16,926
Nottinghamshire	44,327
Hereford and Worcester	16,829
Shropshire	18,502
Stoke	2,902
Staffordshire	17,319
Warwickshire	10,677
Birmingham	5,917
Coventry	6,589
Dudley	3,129
Sandwell	3,712
Solihull	1,766
Walsall	4,366
Wolverhampton	2,570
Luton	1,783
Bedfordshire	6,811
Cambridgeshire	23,463
Essex	41,080
Hertfordshire	22,708
Norfolk	20,500
Suffolk	16,988
City of London	0
Camden	664
Hackney	1,818
Hammersmith and Fulham	1,210
Haringey	1,709

Number of pupils in mixed year group classes. Maintained primary schools by Local Education Authority area, England—January 1998

Schools	Amount
Islington	2,731
Kensington and Chelsea	589
Lambeth	2,388
Lewisham	2,642
Newham	3,716
Southwark	4,778
Tower Hamlets	4,223
Wandsworth	3,056
Westminster	1,015
Barking and Dagenham	1,033
Barnet	2,562
Bexley	2,041
Brent	1,124
Bromley	3,346
Croydon	1,531
Ealing	2,087
Enfield	1,016
Greenwich	3,768
Harrow	632
Havering	3,086
Hillingdon	2,175
Hounslow	964
Kingston-upon-Thames	463
Merton	802
Redbridge	1,173
Richmond-upon-Thames	385
Sutton	1,222
Waltham Forest	1,917
Berkshire	21,018
Milton Keynes	5,209
Buckinghamshire	9,661
Brighton & Hove	2,536
East Sussex	11,244
Portsmouth	1,328
Southampton	1,661
Hampshire	25,923
Isle of Wight	1,768
Kent	33,634
Oxfordshire	26,067
Surrey	9,900
West Sussex	14,948
Bath and NE Somerset	4,143
City of Bristol	8,094
North Somerset	5,512
South Gloucestershire	7,603
Cornwall	17,001
Isles of Scilly	139
Devon	35,446
Bournemouth	555
Poole	610
Dorset	8,782
Gloucestershire	7,603
Somerset	16,805
Swindon	6,318
Wiltshire	19,168
England	1,088,354

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list by local education authority how many primary school pupils in maintained schools were educated in classes with children from more than one year group in January *(a)* 1997 and *(b)* 1998. [63516]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The information requested is not available for January 1997. Figures for January 1998 are shown in the following table:

Number of pupils in mixed keystage classes. Maintained primary schools by Local Education Authority area, England—January of each year

	1997	1998
Hartlepool	185	42
Middlesborough	105	99
Redcar and Cleveland	233	291
Stockton-on-Tees	148	385
Durham[1]	1,584	[3]—
Darlington	[3]—	260
Durham[2]	[3]—	1,774
Northumberland	1,781	1,292
Gateshead	157	377
Newcastle upon Tyne	642	602
North Tyneside	367	179
South Tyneside	48	79
Sunderland	331	318
Cheshire	3,001	2,171
Cumbria	3,415	1,905
Bolton	728	95
Bury	593	262
Manchester	370	709
Oldham	395	239
Rochdale	668	701
Salford	156	379
Stockport	364	498
Tameside	187	397
Trafford	107	116
Wigan	172	164
Lancashire	2,843	2,578
Knowsley	239	224
Liverpool	352	440
St. Helens	51	0
Sefton	108	110
Wirral	678	249
East Riding of Yorkshire	832	856
City of Kingston-upon-Hull	222	491
North East Lincolnshire	263	582
North Lincolnshire	165	129
York	258	122
North Yorkshire	3,121	2,419
Barnsley	313	1,034
Doncaster	669	201
Rotherham	564	748
Sheffield	1,234	86
Bradford	1,509	1,075
Calderdale	821	374
Kirklees	2,222	745
Leeds	573	979
Wakefield	856	747
Derbyshire[1]	5,705	[3]—
Derby	[3]—	124
Derbyshire[2]	[3]—	1,686
Leicestershire[1]	3,387	[3]—
Leicester City	[3]—	571
Rutland	[3]—	158
Leicestershire[2]	[3]—	1,253
Lincolnshire	2,725	2,095
Northamptonshire	1,318	1,451
Nottinghamshire	3,607	2,859
Hereford and Worcester	2,027	1,508
Shropshire	1,212	1,744
Staffordshire[1]	2,242	[3]—
Stoke	[3]—	146
Staffordshire[2]	[3]—	2,084
Warwickshire	1,069	1,107
Birmingham	281	211
Coventry	42	714
Dudley	193	53

Number of pupils in mixed keystage classes. Maintained primary schools by Local Education Authority area, England—January of each year

	1997	1998
Sandwell	39	543
Solihull	62	0
Walsall	291	376
Wolverhampton	408	32
Bedfordshire[1]	1,361	[3]—
Luton	[3]—	16
Bedfordshire[2]	[3]—	822
Cambridgeshire	1,698	1,118
Essex	2,732	3,131
Hertfordshire	3,078	1,651
Norfolk	4,387	4,246
Suffolk	1,650	1,022
City of London	[3]—	[3]—
Camden	30	25
Hackney	167	121
Hammersmith and Fulham	118	62
Haringey	0	24
Islington	601	83
Kensington and Chelsea	160	80
Lambeth	238	172
Lewisham	150	171
Newham	233	432
Southwark	90	82
Tower Hamlets	55	378
Wandsworth	172	202
Westminster	0	66
Barking and Dagenham	271	0
Barnet	519	11
Bexley	137	9
Brent	61	251
Bromley	423	445
Croydon	86	113
Ealing	0	28
Enfield	239	84
Greenwich	268	126
Harrow	142	153
Havering	34	152
Hillingdon	31	198
Hounslow	189	5
Kingston-upon-Thames	279	0
Merton	434	262
Redbridge	389	70
Richmond-upon-Thames	46	39
Sutton	74	78
Waltham Forest	316	317
Berkshire[1]	1,007	[3]—
Milton Keynes	[3]—	941
Berkshire[2]	[3]—	1,779
Buckinghamshire	4,157	2,322
East Sussex[1]	1,289	[3]—
Brighton & Hove	[3]—	160
East Sussex[2]	[3]—	925
Hampshire[1]	1,477	[3]—
Portsmouth	[3]—	131
Southampton	[3]—	119
Hampshire[2]	[3]—	2,190
Isle of Wight	324	390
Kent	4,490	3,130
Oxfordshire	2,096	2,561
Surrey	1,543	654
West Sussex	2,121	2,106
Bath and NE Somerset	575	588
City of Bristol	1,098	420
North Somerset	188	144
South Gloucestershire	736	686
Cornwall	1,830	2,767
Isles of Scilly	10	9
Devon[1]	1,[illegible]73	[3]—
Bournemouth	[3]—	0
Poole	[3]—	43
Devon[2]	[3]—	3,306

Number of pupils in mixed keystage classes. Maintained primary schools by Local Education Authority area, England—January of each year

	1997	1998
Dorset	1,643	640
Gloucestershire	2,095	2,634
Somerset	1,323	2,264
Wiltshire[1]	2,139	[3]—
Swindon	[3]—	410
Wiltshire[2]	[3]—	2,149
England	110,850	95,951

[1] Before local government reorganisation
[2] After local government reorganisation
[3] Not applicable

British Beef

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the local authorities which permit British beef to be served on school menus. [64114]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not collected centrally.

New Deal

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the provision of data for the subsidised employment option under the New Deal. [64171]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Over 11,000 young people have found work through the subsidised Employment option of the New Deal for 18–24 year olds, in addition to the over 27,000 young people who have found unsubsidised jobs. This figure is drawn from the latest Government Statistical Service data to the end of September 1998 and the provisional Management Information to the end of October 1998.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list *(a)* total expenditure and *(b)* expenditure by programme by his Department in Scotland on areas covered by the exception under H.3 of Head H in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998. [63801]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Areas excepted under Schedule 5, Head H3 of the Scotland Act 1998 are careers services under the Employment and Training Act 1973, and assisting persons to establish themselves as self-employed under the Enterprise and New Towns (Scotland) Act 1990. This Department spends no money in Scotland on either.

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the offices or agencies under his control which will be subject to L.2 of Head L in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998; how many people are currently employed in these offices; and what equal opportunities practices are adopted in these offices. [63802]

Mr. Mudie *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Schedule 5, Head L2 of the Scotland Act 1998 denotes equal opportunities, a matter reserved to the UK Parliament. A DfEE offices and agencies are subject to the requirements of equal opportunities laws, which are GB-wide. Numbers employed in DfEE offices and agencies, and the DfEE's equal opportunities practices, are contained in the Departmental Report which is in the Library of the House. The published draft Statutory Instrument on Cross-Border Public Authorities lists two DfEE-sponsored bodies, the Construction Industry Training Board and Engineering Construction Industry Training Board, which employ 1,003 (CITB) and 41 (ECITB) staff, and whose equal opportunities practices follow their policies as published in their Annual Reports, which are in the Library.

Bureaucracy

Mr. Willetts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when the working group on reducing bureaucracy was established; what are its terms of reference; who are its members; and when it is expected to report. [63960]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Working Group on Reducing the Bureaucratic Burden on Teachers was set up in July 1997.

The Group's terms of reference were to report to Ministers on:

- the sources of bureaucratic burdens in schools, including those from central government, local government, national bodies involved with schools and schools own management and administrative practices;
- ways of reducing those burdens, including:
  - clarifying minimum requirements for complying with legal obligations such as OFSTED inspections;
  - streamlining processes;
  - identifying best practice and how this can best be spread;
  - making best use of information technology;
- areas where further study is needed to identify improvements.

The Members of the Group were:

Peter Owen (chair): Director General for Schools, DfEE

Denis Allnut: Director, Analytical Services, DfEE

Nick Sanders: Director, School Curriculum, funding and Teachers, DfEE

Gwenlian Evans: Deputy General Secretary, Association of Teachers and Lecturers

Nigel de Gruchy: General Secretary, National Association of Schoolmasters/Union of Women Teachers

Rowie Shaw: Director of Professional Services, National Association of Head Teachers

John Bangs: Assistant Secretary, National Union of Teachers

David Jones: Acting General Secretary, Professional Association of Teachers

Colin Broomfield: Head of Cheshunt School, Honorary Secretary, Secondary Heads Association

Pat Petch: Chair, National Governors' Council

John Fowler: Local Government Association

Greg Hill: Education Officer for Information Technology, Metropolitan Borough of Solihull

Michael Collier: Chief Executive, Funding Agency for Schools

John Taylor HMI: Inspection Quality Monitoring and Development Team, Office for Standards in Education

Tony Millns: Assistant Chief Executive (Communications), School Curriculum and Assessment Authority

Stephen Hillier: Head of Corporate Management, Teacher Training Agency

Colin Muid: Deputy Director, Central IT Unit, Cabinet Office

Graham Walker: Senior Partner, Arthur Andersen

Tony Cann CBE: Chairman, Promethean Ltd.

The Group's final report to Ministers was published on 16 January 1998, and a copy is in the Library.

Musical Education

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to improve the musical education of school children. [63710]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The Government recognise that music is a key part of the broad and balanced education to which every child is entitled. Music is a foundation subject in the National Curriculum, which every child must study from the ages of 5 to 14, and it will maintain its key place in the curriculum. We also recognise the important contribution made by LEA music services; that is why we proposed new arrangements to safeguard them in our "Fair Funding" consultation document. We will be making a further announcement on this matter early in the new year.

HEALTH

Accident and Emergency Services

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if the mechanism for the allocation within London of the £378 million capital budget for London's National Health Service will *(a)* take into account the levels of activity of accident and emergency departments, *(b)* take into account the effect on such accident and emergency departments of the closure over the last decade of nearby ones and *(c)* provide a compensation element for the relatively small increases in the annual settlements affecting some London health authorities; and if he will make a statement. [62514]

Mr. Milburn: The importance of improving the standard of facilities and equipment in accident and emergency departments has been recognised by the Government. As a result, £30 million from next year's Modernisation Fund for Capital has been earmarked for investment in accident and emergency departments of which £4.367 million has been allocated to London. These resources will be used to provide faster, better services for patients and a safer working environment for staff. Funds will be allocated across a range of schemes. Many factors will be taken into consideration in deciding which should have the greatest need for investment including, where applicable, the level of activity of accident and emergency departments.

In response to Sir Leslie Turnberg's review, we are determined to ensure that all Londoners have accessible top quality services with accident and emergency and ambulance services capable of meeting forseeable needs.

Nursing Agencies

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans his Department has to reform nursing agencies; what representations he has received on this subject; and how much NHS organisations paid for agency nurses in each of the last 10 years. [63235]

Mr. Milburn: These agencies are currently required to be licensed under the provisions of the Nurses Agencies Act 1957. We are considering how the regulation of such agencies might be improved, particularly in the context of our plans to introduce regulation of domiciliary care providers. Departmental officials have had discussions with local authorities responsible for licensing agencies and with the Royal College of Nursing as well as representatives of the agencies. The information available on the cost of nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff not employed directly by individual trusts and health authorities is shown in the table. Data prior to 1991/2 are not directly comparable.

Expenditure on nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff not employed directly by individual trusts and HAs

£

Year	*1997–98 prices*
1997–98[1]	216,338,567
1996–97	196,475,547
1995–96	176,296,636
1994–95	144,526,300
1993–94	117,189,126
1992–93	116,088,250
1991–92	121,127,306

[1] Provisional Data

Source:
Annual Financial Returns of NHS Trust
Annual Financial Returns of Health Authorities
Adjusted GDP Deflator: HMT forecasts 1 October 1998

Dentistry

Mr. Cann: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will introduce regulations to lay down minimum quality standards for dentistry; [63483]

(2) what provision currently exists to ensure minimum standards of quality in NHS dentistry in the United Kingdom. [63484]

Mr. Milburn: General dental practitioners working in the National Health Service have to meet the conditions set out in the Dentists Act 1984 and rules made by the General Dental Council under this Act and must also comply with the terms of service contained in the National Health Service General Dental Services (Regulations) 1990.

We will be reviewing these arrangements in connection with our initiative to modernise the regulation of the health car professions.

Mr. Cann: To ask the Secretary of State for Health by what methods his Department records and evaluates complaints which arise in private dental practice. [63485]

Mr. Milburn: The General Dental Council, of which the Department's Chief Dental Officer is a member, investigates allegations of serious professional misconduct in private dental practice.

Mr. Cann: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what meetings he has had with the General Dental Council over the past twelve months and what was discussed. [63486]

Mr. Milburn: My right hon. Friend, the Secretary of State met the President of the General Dental Council, usually accompanied by the Registrar, on at least three occasions in the past twelve months. We have discussed a number of issues relating to dentistry and the regulation of the profession.

Mr. Cann: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment his Department has made of the proportion of dentistry services provided by corporate bodies in the United Kingdom; and if he will examine recent changes in that proportion. [63487]

Mr. Milburn: None. Only those corporate bodies referred to in Section 43 of the Dentists Act may carry out the business of dentistry.

Cancer

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to increase the amount of public information available on cancer. [63713]

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the action which his Department is taking to increase public awareness of the availability of cancer services. [63466]

Mr. Hutton: We are committed to providing high quality, patient-centred care to all cancer patients and have introduced a package of measures to increase the amount of public information available on cancer. Patients need clear information to be fully involved in treatment decisions.

Cancer is a priority area in the Green Paper "Our Healthier Nation" and in conjunction with the Health Education Authority, we have produced information leaflets about early detection and life style factors relevant to cancer. In addition as part of the implementation of the new National Health Service "Information for Health", we are developing a cancer information strategy which will improve the information available to patients and the public. The voluntary secior also has a key role to play in increasing public information available on cancer. We will continue to work closely with them to ensure that patient needs are identified.

Cancer Services

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to create a nursing position which would provide a link between doctor, community and hospital in the treatment of cancer patients. [63712]

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to introduce, on a national basis, the scheme under which GPs receive support from an oncology nurse who liaises between the hospital and GP. [63474]

Mr. Hutton: The Policy Framework for Commissioning Cancer Services (Calman/Hine report) covers the organisation and delivery of cancer services through the development of a specialist, multi-professional, multi-disciplinary workforce, better co-ordination between the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors and the greater involvement of patients in care and prevention. As part of the ongoing implementation of the Calman/Hine recommendations, a primary care and cancer working group will shortly put recommendations to Ministers on how primary care can best contribute to the provision of a seamless, comprehensive and high quality cancer service. We can then consider how nursing posts can best be developed to deliver high quality care for cancer patients within acute and community settings.

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what response he has made to representations from GPs on cancer care services. [63465]

Mr. Hutton: Substantial progress has already been made in improving the organisation and delivery of cancer services through the ongoing implementation of the Calman/Hine recommendations and an integrated network of cancer care. Primary care is seen as the focus of care and we welcome the results of a recent MORI poll that shows that general practitioners want to improve and be involved in improving cancer services.

A working group on primary care and cancer is currently considering how the primary care role can be developed to allow GPs to contribute fully to the ongoing improvements in cancer services. The group's recommendations will be put to Ministers shortly.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63921]

Mr. Milburn: Estimated expenditure on public opinion research, television, radio and newspaper advertising since 1 May 1997 is £8.09 million. The information on total expenditure on direct mail can be provided only at disproportionate cost. A breakdown of the total given is in the table.

£ million

	Expenditure 1997–98 (since 1 May)	*Estimated expenditure 1998–99*
(a) Public opinion research	0.88	[1]1.77
(b) Television, radio and newspaper advertising[2]	2.08	3.36

[1] The estimate includes the 1998–99 general population questionnaire £1 million (costs for this survey are earmarked only and the full cost is not yet known, although the total cost may be equal to £1.3 million).

[2] Excludes Departmental staff recruitment advertising expenditure which is not held centrally.

Colitis and Crohn's Disease

Mr. Fabian Hamilton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what specific support his Department is able to give to the sufferers of colitis and Crohn's disease. [63661]

Mr. Hutton: People with colitis and Crohn's disease can receive a full range of treatment from the National Health Service. Support and information is also provided by the National Association for Colitis and Crohn's Disease, a registered charity to which the Department currently gives funding under Section 64 of the Health Services and Public Health Act 1968.

The Department's policy research programme and the central NHS research and development programmes are not currently supporting any research into colitis and Crohn's disease, because of competing priorities. However, the Medical Research Council, the main agency through which the Government supports biomedical and clinical research, supports a significant portfolio of research related to intestinal diseases and inflammatory bowel diseases. The Council is currently funding three strategic project grants in this area, with a total cost of £186,000 in 1997–98.

Waiting Lists

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to publish lists for each region indicating the performance of each hospital in each waiting list category. [64006]

Mr. Milburn: Details of waiting lists for each National Health Service Executive region and for NHS trusts are published quarterly in "Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England", copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to publish the patient waiting lists for each acute hospital broken down by type of operation awaited. [63999]

Mr. Milburn: Waiting lists for individual procedures are not collected centrally. However, specialty level information is published quarterly in "Hospital Waiting List Statistics: England", copies of which are available in the Library.

Mr. Laxton: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what details are currently made publicly available for each acute hospital on the order of patients on a waiting list. [64000]

Mr. Milburn: For reasons of patient confidentiality, the names of patients on a waiting list and the order in which they appear is not made public.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63879]

Mr. Milburn: The overriding principle of Civil Service recruitment procedures is that they should be fair, and selection should be on merit at each stage.

Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin, and not nationality. The nine ethnic minority categories monitored by Department are based on those used in the 1991 census which did not include an Irish category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Cannabis (Clinical Trials)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what input his Department intends to have into the Royal Pharmaceutical Society's discussions on the forthcoming clinical trials of cannabis; and if he will make a statement. [63987]

Mr. Hutton: It is the Government's policy to actively encourage research into cannabinoids and not to stand in the way of methodologically sound research into the therapeutic uses of cannabis.

The Department welcomed the Working Party on the Therapeutic Uses of Cannabinoids on which the Medical Research Council (MRC) has observer status.

We understand that the working party has now completed its deliberations and that outline proposals will be launched in January before an invited audience. The MRC, via its well established peer review procedures, will consider the proposals for funding.

The Medicines Control Agency has agreed to advise Professor Asscher's group on the regulatory aspects of their proposed trials.

Officials from the Department have been invited to, and will attend, the launch on 11 January 1999.

Smoking

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will estimate the average daily number of cigarettes smoked by a person who has died from a tobacco-related illness. [64098]

Ms Jowell: In 1996 cigarette smokers in the United Kingdom consumed an average of 104 cigarettes a week, which equates to about 15 a day. Information is not available on the average daily number of cigarettes smoked by a person who has died from a tobacco-related illness.

Farm Antibiotics

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the implications for human health of the use of antibiotics in farming. [63374]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Both the Veterinary Products Committee and the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food (ACMSF) have taken into account the public health concerns when providing advice to Government on the use of antibiotics as growth promoters. The ACMSF is close to finalising a report on microbial antibiotic resistance in relation to food safety which will be submitted to Government when completed.

Zinc Bacitracin

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what information he has sought from the Public Health Laboratory Service about the European Commission's proposal to withdraw authorisation of zinc bacitracin as a veterinary medicine; and if he will make a statement. [64028]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The view of the Public Health Laboratory Service has not been sought on the proposal to ban zinc bacitracin as a growth promoter. Both the Veterinary Products Committee and the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food have provided advice to Government taking into account the public health concerns surrounding growth promoters, including zinc bacitracin.

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what assessment he has made of the public health implications of a change by poultry producers from the use of zinc bacitracin to avilamycin; and if he will make a statement. [64029]

Ms Jowell *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* A working group of the Advisory Committee on the Microbiological Safety of Food is considering the question of microbial antibiotic resistance in relation to food safety. In advance of its report, the Committee has advised Ministers that the use as growth promoters of antimicrobials where there is a medical equivalent in current or planned use should be phased out at the earliest opportunity. For growth promoters where there is currently no medical equivalent or where medical use is rare, the advice was that there is currently insufficient information available to justify an immediate ban. The use of substances like avilamycin should therefore be kept under review and if any evidence becomes available of medical equivalents being developed then their use as growth promoters should be phased out.

Medical Negligence

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is his planned timescale for *(a)* making decisions on the recommendations contained in Lord Justice Atton's report on medical negligence and *(b)* putting forward proposals for reducing litigation in the NHS. [62672]

Mr. Milburn: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is currently considering what further action to take in connection with the many replies to his call for ideas on reducing litigation in the National Health Service, including the recommendations in Lord Justice Otton's report

NHS Consultants

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce maximum working times for NHS consultants. [63258]

Mr. Milburn: National Health Service consultants, in common with all directly employed hospital staff with the exception of doctors in training, are subject to the Working Time Regulations. These regulations came into force on 1 October 1998 and implement European Community Directive 93/104/EC on the organisation of working time. They set a maximum working time limit of 48 hours a week. Under the terms of the regulations, however, doctors can volunteer on an individual basis to work longer than 48 hours.

The Health Departments have agreed some derogations with the British Medical Association, as allowed under the regulations. These allow doctors and their employers to organise service cover flexibly to comply with the basic 48 hour limit, thereby maintaining high quality patient care around the clock.

Angela Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will introduce mechanisms for monitoring the amount of time consultants spend in private practice; and if he will review the current contracts between NHS trusts and NHS consultants. [63260]

Mr. Milburn: Negotiations have began between officials and representatives of the British Medical Association on a new contract for consultants. We want to see robust arrangements in place to ensure that the undoubted energy and commitment of consultants is clearly focused on NHS service priorities and on improving the quality of patient care.

The vast majority of our consultants work hard for the NHS and more than fulfil their contractual commitments. We need a contract which ensures that their undoubted energies are focused clearly on delivering key service goals and priorities, providing patients with the high quality care that they need and expect, increasing productivity where it is needed most and cutting waiting lists.

TREASURY

Share Transactions (Stamp Duty)

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the rate of stamp duty applied on share transactions in each member state of the European Union. [62277]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Other Member States impose a variety of taxes on share transactions. The table gives a broad summary of the latest information we have about stamp duties and similar taxes on share transfers in EU Member States.

EU Member States	
Austria	Stock exchange turnover tax at 0.15% or 2.5% depending on the type of company[1]
Belgium	Stock exchange turnover tax—normal rate 0.17%[2]
Denmark	Share transfer tax at 0.5%[3]
Finland	Share transfer tax (only for non-Stock Exchange deals) at 1.6%[4]
France	Stock exchange turnover tax at 0.3% on the fraction of each transaction under or equalling FF1m and at 0.15% on each fraction exceeding FF1m. An allowance of FF150 is applied to the tax due on each transaction and the tax due on each transaction may not exceed FF4,000.
	In addition registration duty at 4.8% on the sale of partnership shares in limited liability companies. The rate is 1% for founders' shares in corporations, subject to maximum tax of FF20,000 and exemption if there is no deed of transfer[5]
Germany	No stamp duty on share transfers.
Greece	Stock exchange transfer tax at 0.3%[6]
Ireland	Stamp duty on share transfers at 1%[7]
Italy	Stock exchange turnover tax at 0.14%[8]
Luxembourg	No stamp duty on share transfers.

EU Member States	
Netherlands	No stamp duty on share transfers.
Portugal	Stamp duty is levied on the transfer of shares at 4% on commission[9]
Spain	Share transfers subject to transfer tax/stamp duty and VAT where more than 50% of a company's assets consist of real property situated in Spain and, as a result of the transfer, the acquired obtains full ownership of these assets or obtains control over the company[10]
Sweden	No stamp duty on share transfers.
UK	Stamp Duty or Stamp Duty Reserve Tax is charged on transfers of UK shares at 0.5% whether the transfers are made in the UK or elsewhere. There is no charge on transfers of depositary receipts or transfers within clearance services, but in both of these situations there is a single charge of 1.5% on the transfer or issue of shares into the depositary or clearance service.

[1] International Bureau of Fiscal Documentation. April 1998.
[2] Belgian Ministry of Finance Tax Survey: information correct at 1 January 1997.
[3] Share transfer law, as amended (1998).
[4] Transfer tax law, 1998.
[5] Article 978 of the General Tax Code (stock exchange tax), Article 726 of the General Tax Code (registration tax), 1998.
[6] International Bureau of Fiscal Documentation, April 1998.
[7] Stamp Act 1891, as amended (1998).
[8] Stock exchange transfer tax law (1998).
[9] Finance ministry communiqué 23/1/98.
[10] Transfer tax law (1998).

Mr. Whittingdale: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the impact of stamp duty on share transactions on the volume of shares traded in *(a)* London and *(b)* Frankfurt. [62278]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Stamp duty is only one of a range of factors that may affect the volume of share transactions and, like all taxes, is kept under review.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list the special advisers in his Department and the issues on which they specialise; and to what level they have been security cleared; [62846]

(2) if he will list the members of the Council of the Economic Advisers and their principal employment. [62782]

Ms Hewitt: There are four Special Advisers in the Treasury: Ed Balls, Charles [redacted] Ed Miliband and Spencer Livermore. They advise Treasury Ministers on the full range of Treasury policy issues.

In addition, Chris Wales has been appointed full-time to the Council of Economic Advisers and Paul Gregg has been appointed on a part-time basis. Both appointments are on Special Adviser terms. Mr. Gregg's principal employment is with the London School of Economics.

Special Advisers are subject to the usual security clearance arrangements.

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62804]

Ms Hewitt: I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave the hon. Member for Eastleigh (Mr. Chidgey) on 31 July 1998, *Official Report*, columns *665–66*, which provided much of this information. Since then, the Treasury has appointed the following.

1. Public Services Productivity Panel

(a) remit: to advise Ministers on ways of improving the productivity of government departments and public sector agencies

(b) membership:Nine

(c) composition: 3 Ministers, one other public sector, 5 private sector

(d) remuneration: none

(e) budget: out of pocket expenses only

2. Policy Action Team: Business

(a) remit: to report on:

how successful business support organisations such as Business Links are in serving the most deprived communities;

how it can be made easier for people in poor neighbourhoods to get access to support to start a business or become self-employed;

how access to capital or small firms can be improved, especially for start-ups, including innovative approaches such as 'microcredit';

what can be learnt from new ways of encouraging self-employment, building on the New Deal and Employment Zones and how access to capital can be tied into regeneration strategies more generally.

(b) membership: twenty two

(c) composition: 14 civil servants, four other pubic sector, 4 private sector

(d) remuneration: none

(e) budget: out of pocket expenses only

3. Policy Action Team: Financial Services

(a) remit: to report on:

the scope for development of credit unions, building on planned legislative change;

increasing the availability of insurance services to deprived communities;

the role of banks, Post Offices and other organisations in providing access to and delivery of financial services in deprived neighbourhoods.

(b) membership: eighteen

(c) composition: 9 civil servants, 5 other public sector, 3 voluntary sector, 1 private sector

remuneration: none

budget: out of pocket expenses only.

Eurobonds

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the revenue arising from a 20 per cent. withholding tax on interest payments made on Eurobonds paid to *(a)* non-UK EU residents and *(b)* all non-UK residents, on the assumption that there is (i) no reduction (ii) a 25 per cent. reduction, (iii) a 50 per cent. reduction and (iv) a 75 per cent. reduction in the Eurobond market in the City of London. [62332]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* Reliable estimates are not available.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the value of Eurobond market business carried out in the City of London in each of the last three years. [62331]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* There are no official figures for the value of Eurobond market business carried out in the UK.

Drug Crime

Mr. Singh: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the effectiveness of the controlled delivery method of drug importation into the United Kingdom as a means of combating drug crime. [63266]

Dawn Primarolo: This method of investigation is the subject of international agreement under Article 11 of the United Nations Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances 1988 (The Vienna Convention) and is considered to be a very effective method of combating drug crime.

VAT Registration

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what estimates he has made of the net gain or loss to the Exchequer consequent on changing the threshold for compulsory VAT registration. [63401]

Dawn Primarolo: The cost to the Exchequer from increasing the VAT registration threshold from £49,000 to £50,000 on 1 April 1998 was estimated to be £10 million in 1999–2000.

Pesticides Tax

Sir Alastair Goodlad: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what representations he has received about a possible tax on pesticides; and if he will make a statement. [63451]

Ms Hewitt: We have received a number of representations on a possible tax on pesticides. As my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer announced in the Pre-Budget Report, work is currently being carried out into whether a tax or charge on pesticides would be an effective way to reduce pollution. There is evidence to suggest that pesticides have harmful effects on wildlife, terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, and on human health. The Government will evaluate the findings of the research project, and the results of other ongoing work, in considering how best to proceed. No decision has yet been taken on whether to proceed with a tax or charge on pesticides.

Devolution (Barnett Formula)

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will publish his definition of the Barnett formula in the context of the establishment of the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament; and what changes have been made to *(a)* the formula and *(b)* its interpretation as a result of those establishments. [63482]

Mr. Byers: The Government have already set out a statement of principles to govern changes to the devolved administrations' budgets in a reply given by the then Chief Secretary to the Treasury to my hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Mr. Timms) on 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *510–13*. I shall be publishing a paper describing the funding arrangements for the devolved administrations in due course. This will include details of the operation of the Barnett formula under devolution. Copies will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Rotherham Euro Experiment

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on the *(a)* costs *(b)* purpose and *(c)* results of the Rotherham Euro Experiment; and if he will list the organisations involved. [64190]

Ms Hewitt: "Rotherham Euro Week" was organised by the Rotherham Chamber of Commerce. There was no cost to central Government.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63916]

Ms Hewitt: The information is as follows:

£000

	March 1997–March 1998	*April 1998*	*Total*
a) Public opinion research	121	306	427
b) Television, radio and newspaper advertising	57	[1]6,299	6,356
c) Direct mail	69	59	128

[1] Mainly comprises expenditure on providing information to business about the impact of the euro when it is introduced on 1 January 1999 in 11 EU countries, for which provision was taken in a Summer Supplementary Estimate (HC783).

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63871]

Ms Hewitt: Monitoring in this area is currently based on ethnic origin, not nationality. The nine ethnic origin categories monitored within the civil service are based on those used in the 1991 census, which did not include an Irish category. The categories will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population census.

Budget

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to publish a Green Book alongside the Red Book in the March 1999 Budget. [63271]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The Government consider that information on environmental impacts should be presented alongside, and not separate from, information on economic and financial impacts. The Financial Statement and Budget Report released in March 1998 included, for the first time, an assessment of the environmental impact of those Budget measures which are expected to have a significant effect on the environment. An updated version of that assessment was given in the recent Pre-Budget Report. The Government are looking to build upon that approach in the future. Including an assessment of the environmental impact of Budget measures within Budget documentation reflects the Government's commitment to put the environment at the heart of the policy making.

Single Currency

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the changeover plans regarding preparations for British entry into the single currency will contain details of the Government's convergence strategy. [63866]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The Government's strategy for achieving convergence was set out by the Chancellor in his statement to the House of Commons on 27 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns 583–88. The Government believe that the UK economy needs a period of economic stability to deliver the sustainable convergence needed before we can join the single currency and there is no realistic prospect of our having demonstrated, before the end of this Parliament, that we have achieved convergence which is sustainable and settled, rather than transitory.

The outline national changeover plan will set out the practical steps that would need to be followed if the UK were to decide to join the single currency and is the result of Treasury consultation with our 100 organisations, including trade associations and businesses. Its focus is therefore practical business and public sector issues.

Unemployment

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate unemployment rates over the next three years. [64199]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* In line with the convention adopted by previous Administrations, the Government do not publish forecasts for unemployment.

Brazil

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what action he is taking to assist Brazil in dealing with its current economic difficulties. [64556]

Ms Hewitt: We welcome and support the agreements between the Brazilian Government and the international community to restore confidence in the Brazilian economy. The UK's role in furthering this objective is explained in the written statement laid before both Houses today, pursuant to the International Monetary Arrangements Act 1983.

Pensions Mis-selling

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement on progress made in the review of personal pensions mis-selling. [64557]

Ms Hewitt: Further advances have been made towards completion of the first phase of the review.

Of the 21 firms whose results are set out below only two have resolved less than 75 per cent. of their cases. Fourteen have now resolved over 90 per cent. of their cases.

This progress must be maintained. It is essential that all phase 1 cases are completed by 31 December. Although the industry has largely recognised the need for the pensions review to be completed quickly, some firms could still do better. The regulators will not tolerate further delays, and the Government will continue to support their efforts to see phase 1 completed and phase 2 underway.

The ABI's Pension Adviser's Support Scheme (PASS), which offers small firms assistance with actuarial facilities and financing for the review is a welcome development. All of the 30 major providers have joined PASS, which should prevent many businesses folding. It has aroused considerable interest among independent financial advisers, and will give a significant boost to the pensions review.

Progress by pensions firms in resolving cases of personal pensions mis-selling in the period to the end of November 1998

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
50–75% of cases resolved								
Countrywide	5,293	2,725	584	222	362	200	4	59
IFA Network	406	117	169	117	58	56	14	70
Over 75% of cases resolved								
DBS	2,446	955	1,054	253	801	641	26	76
Burns Anderson	1,288	440	685	265	420	364	28	83
Financial Options	577	398	99	33	66	54	12	84
Windsor Life	9,678	4,172	5,105	333	4,772	3,968	41	88
Sun Life of Canada	29,150	11,336	16,081	2,783	13,298	11,463	39	88
Lincoln National	13,605	2,255	10,950	1,430	9,520	8,520	63	90
Standard Life	7,515	914	6,255	1,314	4,941	4,555	61	90
Colonial	8,732	3,169	5,264	613	4,651	4,154	48	91
Sedgwick	16,928	9,969	5,922	1,950	3,972	3,526	21	91

Progress by pensions firms in resolving cases of personal pensions mis-selling in the period to the end of November 1998

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H
Abbey Life	18,114	6,742	10,748	1,396	9,352	8,412	46	91
Berkeley Independent	186	123	53	32	21	15	8	91
Hill Samuel	6,118	936	5,002	719	4,283	3,970	65	92
London and Manchester	8,614	1,604	6,886	711	6,175	5,642	65	92
CIS	44,681	7,958	36,594	14,197	22,397	19,575	44	93
Friends Provident	7,126	1,333	5,526	837	4,689	4,486	63	93
Pearl	48,506	4,802	42,411	5,855	36,556	34,874	72	94
Legal & General	37,366	15,359	21,648	2,049	19,599	18,230	49	95
Hogg Robinson	2,338	871	1,465	488	977	875	37	96
Equitable Life	7,629	1,968	5,528	1,833	3,695	3,492	46	96

A: cases identified as requiring review
B: of A, cases where investor was informed that information gained during assessment excluded cases from review
C: number of assessments completed
D: cases where the investor has been informed that no redress is due
E: cases where redress has been offered
F: cases where redress has been accepted
G: cases where redress has been accepted as a percentage of cases identified for review ((F/A)x100)
H: cases completed, including exclusions, as a percentage of cases identified for review (((B+D+F)/A)x100)

Swiss Investment Exchanges

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many Swiss investment exchanges carry out investment business in the United Kingdom. [64626]

Ms Hewitt: With effect from today, the Swiss Exchange (SWX), having satisfied the conditions under sections 37 and 40 of the Financial Services Act 1986, has been granted recognition as an Overseas Investment Exchange. The Swiss Exchange is therefore able to carry out investment business in the UK.

Business Start-up Loans

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to encourage the availability of business start-up loans for people from social classes D and E. [63907]

Ms Hewitt: The DTI's Small Firm's Loan Guarantee Scheme already offers support to people with viable business proposals seeking finance but who lack the assets to offer as security against a conventional loan. By providing a guarantee against default the Scheme encourages lenders to lend where finance would not otherwise be available.

As part of the Government's Social Exclusion Agenda, I have established a Policy Action Team which will report by July 1999 on methods of encouraging businesses in poor neighbourhoods. The Team's remit includes examining ways of improving access to capital for small firms, especially start-ups in deprived areas.

Tax Reliefs

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what tax reliefs are currently available for companies giving money to universities and colleges. [63858]

Dawn Primarolo: Most universities and colleges are charities and companies can use tax-effective charitable giving for donations to them.

Companies can also claim tax relief when calculating the business's trading profits for tax purposes for payments made to an approved universtiy, college research institute or similar institution which are to used for scientific research related to the company's trade.

Any payments which a company makes to sponsor a university or college will qualify for a deduction when calculating the business's trading profits for tax purposes if the payment is a revenue payment made wholly and exclusively for trading purposes.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

St. Kilda World Heritage Site

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (1) if it is his policy to urge UNESCO to place St. Kilda World Heritage Site on their in danger list; [63392]

(2) on what date the Government expects UNESCO to announce whether they intend to add the World Heritage Site of St. Kilda to their in danger list. [63393]

Mr. Macdonald: I have been asked to reply.

The Government were fully aware of the environmental sensitivities on and around St. Kilda, and of its status as a World Heritage Site, when they made the decision about which areas in the Atlantic should be offered for petroleum licensing.

We shall be responding to UNESCO to reassure it that there is no case for the placement of St. Kilda on the list of endangered World Heritage Sites.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62812]

Mr. Chris Smith: A list of the taskforces, review panels and advisory groups have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

UK Sports Institute

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how much money has been spent to date by the UK Sports Institute. [62778]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* Sheffield is working closely with the UK and English Sports Councils to work up a successful application for Lottery funding. To date a total of £825,000 has been received from the Lottery Sports Fund by Phoenix Sports Limited, the company formed by the Sheffield Consortium which won the bid, to allow development work to progress. I have asked the Sports Councils to confirm by the end of December the extent and certainty of the matching funding put in place by Phoenix to take the project forward, to continue to exercise the closest control over payments while the project brief is developed, and to report on the final specification for the project in the light of their consultations with the sports which will use it.

National Curriculum (Sport)

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on what dates he has had meetings with the DfEE to discuss the role of sport in the curriculum; and with whom such meetings have taken place. [63424]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Both I and my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State regularly discuss the role of sport in the Curriculum with colleagues from DfEE. My hon. Friend the Minister for School Standards and I attended the launch of the Sporting Ambassadors Scheme, an ESC initiative to provide opportunities for successful sports men and women of all ages to visit schools to enthuse young people about the benefits of physical activity and a healthy lifestyle, on 1 July. My hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Education and Employment and I both discussed sport when we spoke at the Youth Sport Trust's Annual Reception on 18 November.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63880]

Mr. Chris Smith: The overriding principle on recruitment within the Civil Service is that procedures should be fair, and selection should be on merit at each stage.

Monitoring in the area of staff recruitment within DCMS is based on ethnic origin, not nationality. The nine categories monitored are based on those used in the 1991 census, which did not include an Irish category. This will be reviewed following any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Spring: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport which overseas countries the Minister for Sport has visited as part of his ministerial duties since 1 May 1997; and when. [63425]

Mr. Banks *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The rules on travel in this Government are the same as the previous Government. The hon. Member will wish to be aware that I have visited the following countries as part of my Departmental duties since 1 May 1997:

Country	*Date visited*	*Purpose of visit*
France	10 June 1997	Meeting/reception with Madam Buffet re preparations for World Cup 1998
Italy	10 October 1997	Italy v England—Quarter final for 1998 World Cup
United States of America	23 October 1997	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
Trinidad and Tobago	25 October 1997	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
Costa Rica	28 October 1997	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
France	4 December 1997	1998 World Cup Draw
Belgium	27 January 1998	Intergroup meeting on Sport
Japan	6 February 1998	Winter Olympics
South Korea	12 February 1998	Winter Olympics
Thailand	14 February 1998	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
Belgium	17 March 1998	2006 Bid meeting
Paraguay	24 March 1998	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
Argentina	26 March 1998	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
Qatar	19 April 1998	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
France	10 June 1998	Meeting with Madam Buffet and European Union Ministers for Sport
France	10 July 1998	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
Switzerland	1 September 1998	Meeting with President Samaranch and Sepp Blatter
Malaysia	9 September 1998	Commonwealth Games
South Africa	12 September 1998	IAAF 8th Athletics World Cup
Republic of Ireland	27 September 1998	Gaelic Football—All Ireland Final
Spain	5 October 1998	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
France	23 October 1998	Council of Europe Hearing of Bosman Ruling
Cameroon	1 November 1998	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
Mali	3 November 1998	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
Malta	12 November 1998	Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup
Austria	24 November 1998	Troika Sports Ministers meeting

Heads of Missions overseas have reported on the value of these visits, not only to The Football Association's Campaign for the England 2006 World Cup but also in furthering relations between this country and the rest of the world. I will be writing to the hon. Member shortly about these reports.

In the new year I will be visiting Tunisia, New Zealand and Botswana with The Football Association's Bid team, and receiving in London the Vice-Chairman of FIFA, Mr. Jack Warner. Yesterday I had a meeting with my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Derek Fatchett) to discuss

strategy. In the new year I will be meeting with The Football Association's full Executive Committee as part of the planning process for 1999.

National Lottery Retailers

Mr. Grogan: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many National Lottery retailers there are in each parliamentary constituency ranked in order of the number of outlets. [63774]

Mr. Banks: Details on retailers are not held by the Department and are an operational matter for Camelot Group plc. I have therefore asked the Director General of the National Lottery, who is responsible for regulating the operation of the Lottery, to write to my hon. Friend. Copies of his response will be placed in the Libraries of the House.

Millennium Holiday

Mr. Gale: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what arrangements he has made to notify *(a)* the Home Office, *(b)* the DTI, *(c)* the CBI and *(d)* the Library that Friday 31 December 1999 will be a public holiday. [63708]

Mr. Chris Smith *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The Government Departments referred to, and the CBI, were among the many organisations included in a consultation exercise carried out by my Department early this year, in order to establish that the proposal for an additional Bank Holiday on 31 December 199 was widely supported. The additional holiday was announced in the House on 3 June 1998, *Official Report*, column 218, and a press notice was issued on the same day. This was copied to interested Government Departments, and the announcement was widely covered in the media.

HM Nautical Almanac Office holds definitive information on public holidays, and provides an information service based at the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62817]

Mr. Mandelson: My Department has a large number of task forces, review panels and advisory groups.

I have arranged for the information requested for each of these groups to be placed in the Library of the House as soon as it is practicable.

In addition my Department publishes the names of all those appointed to its Nationalised Industries and its executive and advisory non-departmental public bodies on the Public Appointments Website (www.open.gove.uk/pau/paupoint.htm). This information was last updated as of 30 September 1998 and includes the date of appointment and remuneration. I placed a copy of the full list in the Libraries of both Houses in reply to a question tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester, East (Mr. Vaz) on 26 October 1998, to which I replied on 28 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *194*.

Whales and Dolphins

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans the Government have to assess the cumulative impact of oil developments in the Atlantic Frontier on the breeding, feeding and migration of whales and dolphins in the area. [63054]

Mr. Battle: I understand from the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC—the Government's statutory advisers on environment matters) that there is no evidence of petroleum developments in the Atlantic Frontier or any other part of the UK Continental Shelf having had any impact on marine mammals. Nevertheless, the Offshore Petroleum Production and Pipe-lines (Assessment of Environmental Effects) Regulations 1998 require that the cumulative impact of any relevant project on the UKCS should be assessed before any decision about the granting of consent for that project is taken.

Postal Services

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will establish an inquiry into the performance of Royal Mail postal services in rural areas; and if he will make a statement. [63150]

Mr. Ian McCartney: No. Operational responsibility for the performance of Royal Mail postal services nationally rests with the Post Office Board and management. However, under the package of reforms announced last week on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 21–39, to give the Post Office greater commercial freedom, there will also be a new independent Regulator and a strengthened role for the Post Office Users' National Council to protect customer interests, including standards of service and universal service commitments.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of change in the quality of postal services in rural areas in the past three years in terms of the time of day by which deliveries are made. [63869]

Mr. Ian McCartney: None. Operational responsibility for postal delivery times and arrangements in rural areas and towns rests with the Post Office Board and management. Under the package of reforms announced last week, on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 21–39, to give the Post Office greater commercial freedom, there will be a new independent Regulator and a strengthened role for the Post Office Users' National Council to protect customer interests, including standards of service, and universal service commitments.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on target delivery times for postal rounds in rural areas. [63885]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The target delivery times for postal rounds are set by the Post Office. Royal Mail aim to complete deliveries in rural areas by 2.00pm and in towns to complete first deliveries by 9.30am and to complete second deliveries by 2.00pm.

WS9 Turbofan

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when an export licence for the export to China of designs for a military aircraft engine now known as the WS9 turbofan was granted. [62920]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* I understand that the Spey engine was produced in China, under an agreement with Rolls-Royce, under the name of the WS9 turbofan between 1976 and 1979. As the then Minister for Trade said on 27 October 1995, *Official Report*, column *837*, up to July 1991, all export licence application papers were destroyed after six years. Therefore details of any licence issued for the export of the designs in connection with that production agreement are no longer available.

ECGD

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list those nations of the Arabian peninsula, the Middle East and Central Asia in which ECGD *(a)* short term and *(b)* long term and project cover (i) is not currently available but is under review and (ii) is currently available and the dates on which such cover was agreed. [62917]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* The markets where ECGD is on cover for *(a)* short term and *(b)* long term and project cover and the dates which such cover was agreed are as follows:

Country	*(a) Short term* [1]	*(b) Long term* [2]	*Date cover agreed*
Azerbaijan	Yes	Yes	Agreed—June 1996
Bahrain	Yes	Yes	Last Reviewed—August 1996
Egypt	Yes	Yes	Agreed December 1993—Last Review October 1998
Israel	Yes	Yes	Last Reviewed—April 1998
Jordan	Yes	Yes	Agreed—October 1995
Kazakhstan	Yes	Yes	Agreed—August 1993
Kuwait	Yes	Yes	Agreed—1991
Lebanon	Yes	Yes	Agreed—1994
Oman	Yes	Yes	Last Review—ongoing
Qatar	Yes	Yes	Last Review—1997
Saudia Arabia	Yes	Yes	Last Review—November 1998
Syria	Yes	No	ST agreed—1993
Turkmenistan	Yes	Yes	Agreed—May 1994
United Arab Emirates	Yes	Yes	Last Review—January 1994
Uzbekistan	Yes	Yes	Agreed—April 1994
West Bank and Gaza	Yes	Yes	Agreed—November 1996
Yemen	Yes	No	ST agreed—November 1997

[1] Short Term refers to sales of capital goods or projects on cash terms of repayment. Short Term consumer goods are covered by the Private Sector.
[2] Long Term refers to the general availability of medium and long term cover for the sales of capital goods.

The markets where either *(a)* or *(b)* are not currently provided, and cover is under review are:

Iran—long term cover is under review, short term cover has been provided since July 1998.

Kyrgyzstan—Currently no cover, but under review

In addition:

Iraq—ECGD is off cover for Iraq for all facilities.

Tajikistan—No cover available.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry which countries have asked for a rescheduling of Export Credits Guarantee Department loans or interest in 1998; in respect of what sums the rescheduling has been requested; what the dates of such requests were; and if such requests have been agreed. [62918]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 9 December 1998]:* Debts owed to ECGD are rescheduled through the auspices of the Paris Club. During 1998 the following countries sought and successfully negotiated debt reschedulings in Paris:

£

Country	*Date of Paris Agreement*	*ECGD debt rescheduled*
Cote d'Ivoire	23 April	10,456,000
Uganda	24 April	14,003,000
Mozambique	25 May	2,700,000
Senegal	17 June	2,630,000
Indonesia	23 September	260,000,000
Central African Republic	25 September	461,000
Bosnia	28 October	5,000,000
Bolivia	30 October	48,393,000
Russia	A recent request has still to be discussed	

The Paris Club will shortly consider a request from Nicaragua in the wake of Hurricane Mitch. On 10 November the Chancellor and the International Development Secretary announced a willingness to explore, with other creditors, some kind of moratorium on debt for Nicaragua and Honduras.

Animal Welfare

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he plans to take to persuade EU partners to include among the EU's objectives for the next round of World Trade Organisation negotiations the need to revise the rules of the WTO and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade to take greater account of animal welfare standards; and if he will make a statement. [63490]

Mr. Wilson: The Government are committed to improving animal welfare standards. At the Amsterdam Summit last year, we achieved our goal of giving animal welfare a special place in the European Union's priorities, formalised in a Treaty Protocol.

We will need to consult our EU partners closely to consider whether and how best to get the issue on the agenda for the expected new round of negotiations. This will not be easy. There are no widely accepted international animal welfare standards. The WTO is not a standards making body, and developing countries would see any attempt to impose such standards through the WTO as protectionist. Any EU proposal will have to take full account of their legitimate concerns.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he plans to take to ensure that EU producers are not placed at a competitive disadvantage in respect of imports from countries with lower animal welfare standards; and if he will make a statement. [63489]

Mr. Wilson: As a result of initiatives we took in our Presidency, the European Commission has been charged with producing a report by June 1999 considering the relationship between EU and third country farm animal welfare standards. If the problem is not soluble under current world trade rules, the EU may need to raise the issue as part of the comprehensive trade negotiations we hope will start in 2000. However, the Government will be determined to avoid imposing EU standards unfairly on developing country producers.

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what recent representations he has received regarding the impact on animal welfare measures of the rules of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the World Trade Organisation; and if he will make a statement. [63491]

Mr. Wilson: Since the beginning of September, my Department has received more than 200 letters from MPs and members of the public on this matter. I have also met with animal welfare groups to discuss the issues.

Coal Industry

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much of the British Coal Corporation's exceptional restructuring costs listed in the answer to the hon. Member for Teignbridge of 11 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *223–24*, was spent on redundancy payments in each year from 1979–80 to 1997–98. [63346]

Mr. Battle: The following table sets out expenditure by British Coal Corporation over the period 1987 to 1994 on redundancy payments to industrial workers. Prior to 1987 redundancy payments to coal miners were not made by British Coal Corporation but were made under the Government's Redundant Mineworkers' Payments Scheme.

Expenditure by British Coal Corporation on redundancy payments to industrial workers [1]

Year	*£ million*
1987	45
1988	281
1989	401
1990	109
1991	192
1992	405
1993	490
1994	212

[1] Management records of British Coal Redundancy Arrangements 1987–1994. Figures are on a calendar year basis.

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what was the average redundancy payment made to coal miners made redundant in each year from 1979–80 to 1997–98. [63347]

Mr. Battle: Prior to 1987 redundancy payments to coal miners were made under the Government's Redundant Mineworkers' Payments Scheme. These payments comprised lump sums plus ongoing weekly benefit for those over a certain age who remained unemployed. It is therefore not possible to calculate meaningful average redundancy payments to coal miners made redundant over that period. From April 1987 British Coal Corporation became responsible for its industrial redundancy arrangements and this comprised a system of lump sum payments only. The following table sets out the average redundancy payment made by British Coal Corporation to redundant colliery industrial workers over the period 1987 to 1994. These figures are on a calendar year basis.

Average lump sum payments under British Coal Redundancy Arrangements [1]

Year	*£*
1987	15,300
1988	16,040
1989	18,530
1990	19,675
1991	22,730
1992	21,460
1993	23,535
1994	25,670

[1] Management records of British Coal Redundancy Arrangements 1987–1994. Figures are on a calendar year basis

Mr. Nicholls: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many coal miners were made redundant in each year from 1979–80 to 1997–98. [63345]

Mr. Battle: The following table sets out the number of coal miners made redundant from British Coal Corporation over the period 1979/80 up to privatisation in December 1994. Comparable data on redundancies after December 1994 are not readily available.

Year	*Number of redundancies* [1]
1979–80	1,333
1980–81	2,850
1981–82	9,294
1982–83	8,149
1983–84	17,805
1984–85	6,537
1985–86	30,095
1986–87	27,131
1987–88	16,800
1988–89	6,486
1989–90	13,042
1990–91	8,100

Year	Number of redundancies[1]
1991–92	13,500
1992–93	12,100
1993–94	21,300
1994–95	3,000

[1] British Coal Corporation Annual Report and Accounts (various). Data from 1979–80 to 1989–90 inclusive refer to redundancies of industrial workers at collieries. Data from 1990/91 to December 1994 refer to reduction in colliery industrial manpower

Energy Saving

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations he has received regarding claims about energy saving by British Gas Trading Ltd. in promotional material. [64004]

Mr. Battle: Neither the Secretary of State nor I have received representations regarding energy saving claims by British Gas Trading Ltd. in its promotional material.

Baby Jag

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what grants or other assistance have been given or promised by his Department or by the European Commission to *(a)* Ford and *(b)* its suppliers in connection with the new manufacturing and assembly lines for the Baby Jag. [63985]

Mr. Battle: To secure the X400 investment for Halewood, Jaguar—a wholly owned subsidiary of Ford Motor Company—was offered a support package made up of £40 million Regional Selective Assistance (RSA) and up to a £3 million contribution from the local partners. No offer of support has been made to the suppliers for the X400 project.

Supermarkets (Prices)

Mr. Martlew: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his oral statement of 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 289–95, from whom the report published by Verdict Research was commissioned; and if he will place a copy of the report in the Library. [63997]

Dr. Howells: Verdict Research Limited Publishes a range of reports on the retailing sector. Their Report "Verdict on Grocers and Supermarkets 1999" was published on 7 December 1998 and copies are available from the publishers (price £890). Verdict Research reports provide independent analysis of retail sectors, key companies and trends. During the debate I quoted from Verdict's news release on their report and I shall arrange for copies of this news release to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Minimum Wage

Mrs. Humble: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the representations received by his Department on the draft national minimum wage regulations concerning the level of the proposed accommodation deduction, indicating the balance of opinions submitted on the level of the proposed amount; and if he will make a statement. [63781]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Representations on the draft National Minimum Wage Regulations dealing with the level of deductions allowable for accommodation provided by the employer were received, by 6 November, the end of the consultation exercise, from the following:

Abbeyfield Society
ABTA
Acorn Ventures Limited
Action with Communities in Rural England
Action Centres UK
Association of British Riding Schools
B & N Housing
Brathay Hall Trust
Hampshire Care Association
Hothorpe Hall
Kingswood Group
L'Arche
MENCAP
British Activity Holidays Association
British Chamber of Commerce
Brewers & Licensed Retailers Association
British Horse Society
British Hospitality Association
Experience UK Limited
FRES
NCVO
Outward Bound Trust
PGL Travel Limited
Whiteley Homes Trust
YHA.

Few of those who responded to the exercise said that they would like the offset to be increased. We are currently considering the representations and will present the regulations to Parliament for approval shortly.

Chechnya

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library the written advice his Department gives to British companies considering contracts in Chechnya. [63630]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* I would refer the hon. Member to the reply given the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Manchester, Central (Mr. Lloyd) on 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *402–03*, and to the written travel advice which he placed in the Library of the House. If asked, the Department advises all companies travelling to destinations about which there may be concern to contact the Foreign Office for advice about travel.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what advice his Department gave to Granger Telecom, Surrey in respect of the safety of British Nationals working in Chechnya. [63629]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The Department did not receive a request from Granger Telecom for advice in respect of the safety of Granger's British staff working in Chechnya. Had such a request

been received, the Department's officials would have referred Granger Telecom to the Foreign Office for travel advice.

Mrs. Browning: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry on what date his Department was informed of negotiations relating to the contract between Granger Telecom, Surrey and Chechen Telecom. [63628]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* There is no record of Granger Telecom having informed the Department about negotiations relating to its contract with Chechen Telecom.

Credit Reference Agencies

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to review the rules and regulations in the Consumer Credit Act 1974 governing the granting of licences to credit reference agencies. [64078]

Dr. Howells: I have no current plans to review the rules and regulations governing the granting of licences to credit reference agencies. However, I am pleased to announce that later this month I will publish a consultation paper on the changes in Regulations needed to put the supervision of rights of individuals and sole traders on access to their credit reference files unequivocally under the Data Protection Registrar. This replaces the dual supervision by the Director General of Fair Trading and the DPR which currently exists under the Consumer Credit Act 1974 and the Data Protection Act 1984. It will complete the regulatory changes on this issue introduced in the Data Protection Act 1998. The change will also give sole traders the clear right to see their credit reference files, rather than the conditional right they currently have. The paper will also set out proposals for making clearer the statements of rights borrowers receive on correcting wrong information held on their files.

Freephone Numbers

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what research his Department has undertaken to ascertain the impact upon business of changes proposed to the system of freephone numbers by OFTEL. [63521]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The administration of the National Numbering Scheme is a matter for Oftel. Oftel has consulted extensively on changes to numbering arrangements. The National Numbering Scheme was established following public consultation. Oftel's proposals to change freephone numbers, in line with the Scheme, were the subject of a separate consultation earlier this year and conclusions have yet to be reached.

Demand for freephone numbers increased by over 50 per cent. in 1998, compared to 1997. Oftel believes that a change to freephone numbers is necessary as it will shortly run out of 0800 blocks of numbers.

Departmental Visits

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many officials of his Department visited Chile in each year since 1990. [64021]

Mr. Wilson *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Central records are not held for the years preceding 1995; however, the following figures are available for 1995 and subsequent years:

Year	*Number*
1995	3
1996	6
1997	6
1998	[1]1

[1] regional conference

Inward Investment (North-West)

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list the inward investment projects in the North West which have *(a)* commenced operation and *(b)* been announced since May 1997. [64217]

Mrs. Roche: There is no requirement to notify projects to the Department. The list includes only those projects where the Department's Invest in Britain Bureau and its regional partners were involved or which have come to their notice. It does not include projects where the company has requested commercial confidentiality. It is based on information provided by the companies at the time of the announcement of the decision to invest in the UK. It takes no account of subsequent developments.

Company Name	*Project Name*	*Date of Announcement*
Hosokawa Stott	Manufacture of Equipment	1 January 1997
Tetra Pak	HDPE Milk Bottles	1 May 1997
Associated Capital Corporation	Credit Card Operations Centre	22 May 1997
Brewster Wallcoverings	Distribution & Warehousing of Paint	1 June 1997
Teco Information Systems	Sales, Distribution Configuration Co.	30 June 1997
Telewest Communications	Sales TV	1 August 1997
Viking Direct	Call Centre, Office Equipment, Stationery	5 August 1997
DFDS Transport	Shipping Agents	8 August 1997
Aspentech	Developer of Computer Software	31 August 1997
Centurion Furniture Plc.	Upholstered Furniture	1 September 1997
Kodak	Manufacture of Imaging Products	22 September 1997
Yardley Plastics Ltd.	Thermoplastic Compounds Processing	23 September 1997
Hosokawa Micron Ltd.	Powder Processing Equipment	29 September 1997
Voith Sulzer Paper Technology	Calendars/ Rolls for Paper	13 October 1997
AB Thoreb	Software Programmes/IT Systems	1 November 1997
Dunlop Hevea (Ind. Footwear) Ltd.	Manufacture of Industrial Footwear	12 November 1997
ELF Aquitaine (UK) Ltd.	Pharmaceutical Intermediates	19 November 1997
Francis Shaw and Co Ltd.	Rubber Mixing Machinery	1 December 1997
Woodbridge Foam (UK) Ltd.	Car Seat Foam	15 December 1997

Company Name	Project Name	Date of Announcement
Volclay Ltd.	Cat Litter and Specialised Clay Products	20 December 1997
Learonal (UK) Plc.	Industrial Chemicals	2 January 1998
A1 Security and Electrical ltd.	Manufacturer of Security Alarm System	23 January 1998
North West Forgemasters Ltd.	Engineering Components	1 February 1998
Holt Lloyd International Ltd.	Car Care Products	2 February 1998
Ashley and Rock Ltd.	Electrical Wiring Accessories	3 February 1998
Tomcat UK Ltd.	Aluminium Structural Components	12 February 1998
Delevan	Fuel Components Servicing	1 March 1998
Phonak UK Ltd.	Hearing Aids	11 March 1998
Polynorm Plastics (UK) Ltd.	Automotive Components	29 March 1998
Ultramark Adhesive Products Ltd.	Self-Adhesive Vinyls and Films	1 April 1998
Shell Services International Ltd.	Pan-European IT Helpdesk Services	22 April 1998
Oliver Ashworth	Distributor and Stockholder of Pipeline Products	23 April 1998
IP Information Services Ltd.	IT-Shared Services Centre	26 May 1998
Leyland Trucks Ltd.	Manufacture and Sale of Commercial and Military Trucks	1 June 1998
NGF Europe Ltd.	Manufacture of Glass Products	29 July 1998
SICPS UK Ltd.	Printing Inks and Security Inks	1 August 1998
New Balance Athletic Shoes (UK) Ltd.	Manufacture of Athletic Shoes	1 September 1998
Leyland Trucks Ltd.	Manufacture of Commercial Vehicles	2 September 1998
Candy Domestic Appliances Ltd.	Manufacture of Domestic Refrigeration Appliances	21 September 1998
Sonae UK Ltd.	Manufacture of Particleboard	30 September 1998

Civil Aerospace Research

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to promote British civil aerospace research and development; and if he will make a statement. [64243]

Mr. Battle: The Department has maintained a close dialogue with the aerospace industry concerning the support available for civil research which has been provided under the Department's Civil Aviation Research and Technology Demonstration (CARAD) Programme. Plans for the future promotion of research await decisions about detailed DTI budget allocations in future years.

Support has been provided by the Government for development of civil aerospace projects in the form of repayable risk-sharing investment known as Launch Investment. Applications for Launch Investment will be considered on their merits and against competing demands on public expenditure.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what sums his Department spent on the civil aerospace research and development programme in each of the last three years; and if he will make a statement. [64245]

Mr. Battle: I refer the hon. Member to the written answer given to the hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *67–68*.

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what are his Department's *(a)* current and *(b)* planned levels of spending on the civil aerospace research and development programme; and if he will make a statement. [64244]

Mr. Battle: The budget for the Department's Civil Aviation Research and Technology Demonstration (CARAD) Programme for the current financial year is £21,102,000. No decisions have yet been made about detailed DTI budget allocations in future years.

Industrial Tribunal Claims

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he expects the backlog of claims to industrial tribunals in respect of pension rights for part-time workers to have been dealt with. [64234]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Progress on these pension cases has been stayed pending the outcome of a further referral to the European Court of Justice in January 1998. When the outcome of this referral is known, the cases will be processed in accordance with directions given by the Presidents of Employment Tribunals.

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many industrial tribunal claims relating to part-time workers' pension rights have been initiated since the European Court of Justice decision of September 1994; and how many have been settled. [64232]

Mr. Ian McCartney: Following the judgment of the European Court of Justice in September 1994 approximately 42,000 cases have been registered claiming part-time worker pension rights. The pension cases are not identified separately in the records of the Employment Tribunals, therefore, information is not available on the number of cases that have been settled.

Clergy (Employment Rights)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for legislation which will affect the employment rights of clergy. [63711]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Fairness at Work White Paper contained a proposal for an order making power enabling the Government to extend the coverage of employment legislation to categories of workers not currently covered. It also indicated that the Government would consult fully on specific changes before exercising this power. The position of the clergy is one of the matters to which consideration will be given during the course of this consultative process.

Israel

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library the reports he

has received from the IAEA concerning the *(a)* Negev Nuclear Research Centre in Dimona, *(b)* Nahal Soreq, *(c)* Yodefat, *(d)* Klar Zokhayra, *(e)* Eilabin, *(f)* Haifa (Yelloweake) and *(g)* Rehovot (Heavy Water) plants in Israel. [62667]

Mr. Battle: The only Israeli plant subject to IAEA safeguards inspections is Nahal Soreq. The IAEA have published only one report concerning this plant, a 1993 report entitled 'The Radiological Accident in Soreq'. I will be placing a copy of this report in the Library of the House.

Iraq

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library the reports he has received from the IAEA concerning the *(a)* Al Tuwaitha, *(b)* Al Quan, *(c)* Al Jesira, *(d)* Akashot, *(e)* Al Qa Qaa, *(f)* Al Athaar, *(g)* Al Hadre, *(h)* Roshdiya and (j) Ash Sharqat plants in Iraq. [62666]

Mr. Battle: The Iraqi Action Team of the IAEA have published twenty-nine reports covering their short-term safeguards inspections in the period 1991–1995. Since then they have published a further six six-monthly consolidated reports. My officials have ordered copies of these reports from the IAEA in Vienna and I will place these in the Library of the House once I have received them in the New Year.

Regional Selective Assistance

Mr. Sutcliffe: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement about the provision of regional selective assistance in euros. [64552]

Mr. Mandelson: With effect from 1 January 1999, recipients of Regional Selective Assistance (in Northern Ireland, Selective Financial Assistance) for internationally mobile investment will be given the option of having their grants denominated in euro where it is to the country's competitive advantage to do so. This will particularly help those companies which trade internationally and who may find it convenient to use the euro a common planning currency. It shows that the UK is well prepared for companies dealing in the euro and will help ensure that the UK remains the most favoured venue for foreign direct investment in the EU.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Terminator Gene Technology

11. **Mr. Baker:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what recent assessment she has made of the potential impact of terminator gene technology on developing countries. [62753]

Mr. Foulkes: My Department is currently undertaking a wide-ranging review of the implications of all aspects of genetically modified organisms for poor farmers in developing countries.

Our Government are strong supporters of a Bio Safety protocol which would establish standards to regulate the development and release of genetically modified organisations world wide.

Sustainable Projects

13. **Mr. Ben Chapman:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she has taken to ensure that the objective of sustainability is included in UK aid programmes. [62755]

Clare Short: Sustainable development is crucial to the elimination of poverty and is central to the Government's policy on international development. My Department applies rigorous procedures to ensure that the projects and programmes we support have clear sustainable outcomes which benefit poor people.

We seek to work in partnership with recipient countries committed to pro-poor policies and explore with them how assistance will be economically and financially sustainable in the long term. This includes promoting effective planning of government expenditure and revenue, reduction of debt to sustainable levels and sustainable use of environmental resources.

HIV/AIDS

14. **Mr. Borrow:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the work undertaken by her Department to prevent the spread of AIDS and HIV in the developing world. [62756]

18. **Angela Smith:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what initiatives her Department has taken to combat the spread of HIV and AIDS in developing countries. [62761]

Clare Short: We are supporting national programmes in 39 developing countries. We are also working in collaboration with UNAIDS and other UN agencies in co-ordinated efforts. And we are funding research into development of new methods of protection against HIV, providing subsidised contraceptives and programmes to encourage safe sex, and supporting the development of an HIV/AIDS vaccine by contributing to the International Aids Vaccine Initiative.

24. **Mr. Bradshaw:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department has taken to help prevent the spread of HIV in sub-Saharan Africa. [62767]

Clare Short: We are working to prevent the spread of AIDS and HIV in sub-Saharan Africa through contributions to the work of UNAIDS, the EC and international non-governmental organisations such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation. We have significant programmes with national governments in Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe. We are also funding research into the development of new methods of protection against HIV, providing subsidised contraceptives and programmes to encourage safe sex, and supporting the development of an HIV/AIDS vaccine, by contributing to the International Aids Vaccine Initiative.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her Department's budget is allocated to HIV and AIDS projects. [64174]

Clare Short: In calendar year 1997, 3.6 per cent. of the UK overseas development assistance (£73 million) was invested in reproductive health, excluding expenditure

through the EC and the World Bank, which we are unable to dis-aggregate. Much of our spending on improving basic healthcare systems will also bring benefits to people with HIV and AIDS. We estimate that around 40 per cent. of this sum was invested in work which related directly to HIV/AIDS.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made to the World Bank to increase support for HIV/AIDS vaccine development. [64182]

Clare Short: My officials meet regularly with counterparts in the World Bank to encourage them in their support for HIV/AIDS vaccine development through International Aids Vaccine Initiative (IAVI) and other channels. The latest of these meetings took place in Washington in November.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on progress made on establishing an HIV/AIDS vaccine purchase fund. [64183]

Clare Short: The World Bank is considering how best to establish a global HIV/AIDS vaccine purchase fund for the long term benefit of the poorest, most affected countries. Consultations continue with Governments and a range of profit and not-for-profit groups such as the International Aids Vaccine Initiative. Britain is committed to supporting the development of a safe and effective vaccine and to creating the conditions which make it affordable and accessible to affected developing countries.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* by project and *(b)* by country the (i) HIV and AIDS and (ii) education projects her Department supports. [64180]

Clare Short: We provide direct support for HIV/AIDS activities in 39 Countries, intensively in ten of these. A list will be placed in the Library of the House. It does not include HIV/AIDS activities supported through multilateral institutions such as United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), the World Bank and World Health Organisation (WHO), all of whom receive funding from the British Government.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has made to the Governments of G8 countries to support the International Aids Vaccine Initiative. [64179]

Clare Short: We regularly encourage G8 counterparts to contribute to HIV/AIDS vaccine development through International Aids Vaccine Initiative (IAVI). We took the latest opportunity available for us in the margins of a meeting last week of the UNAIDS Programme Co-ordinating Board in Delhi.

Bangladesh

15. **Mr. Bennett:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what aid her Department is currently providing to Bangladesh. [62757]

Clare Short: We have a substantial programme in Bangladesh and expect to invest around £67 million in 1998–99. This includes £45 million for our normal bilateral co-operation activities, of which more than half is spent on direct poverty assistance, with projects in health and education, micro-credit, employment generation, and food production. Other projects target infrastructure development, and public sector reform. We are also providing £22 million additional assistance this year to assist recovery from the recent devastating floods.

AIDS (South Africa)

16. **Mr. Clapham:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to assist the South African Government in combating AIDS. [62758]

Clare Short: South Africa is one of the countries most badly affected by HIV/AIDS. The rate of new infections is estimated at 1,500 per day and 2.5 million people are already infected. South Africa's leaders are beginning to take the issue seriously and support for AIDS control and preventions is a priority for our development partnership. But the challenge also requires regional action and we are discussing with governments, UNAIDS and the European Commission how to intensify our support for sexual and reproductive health to develop more effective national and regional programmes.

Non-governmental Organisations

17. **Mr. St. Aubyn:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the role of NGOs in the delivery of aid. [62759]

Clare Short: NGOs have a very important role to play, along with other elements of civil society, in helping deliver programmes and in raising awareness of the needs and rights of poor people in both developing countries and Britain.

EC Development Assistance

19. **Mr. Watts:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to improve the quality of EC development assistance. [62762]

Clare Short: We have recently published our strategy for improving the quality of EC development assistance. It has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses. It was prepared in consultation with a wide range of interested bodies. The paper sets out 18 detailed objectives for the Department for International Development (DFID) for its partnership with the EC. The main focus is on: improving the poverty focus of the EC's programmes, in particular through forthcoming decisions on resource allocation; rationalising the Commission's organisation structure for managing external assistance, and strengthening staffing; improving aid management systems and harmonising and streamlining procedures to increase the developmental impact of the EC's programmes; and strengthening coordination and collaboration between the Commission, member states and other donors, within a framework managed by beneficiary countries.

DFID will work with other member states, the Commission, the European Parliament and the Court of Auditors in pursuit of these objectives. We are committed to maximising the effectiveness of the EC's work to promote international development. Our approach will, as

in the past, be informed by discussions with beneficiary countries, NGOs, the private sector and the academic community.

Nepal

20. **Mr. Campbell-Savours:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will assist programmes of good governance in Nepal; and if she will make a statement. [62763]

Clare Short: We are assisting programmes of good governance in Nepal and hope to do more in the future. Nepal's new democracy has led to increasing recognition of the need for fundamental reforms to bring about more effective government. The Government's plans for decentralisation may lead to improvements. We shall be looking at ways in which we can support this. We believe that Government and donors need to do more to empower the people to pursue their basic rights. The success of the national community forestry programme demonstrates that the right combination of legislative reform, administrative change and empowerment has great potential for changing the lives of the disadvantaged. This is part of DFID's strategy which we recently published in the Nepal Country Strategy Paper, a copy of which is available in the Library of the House.

Hurricane Mitch

21. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on the findings of the experts from her Department on the reconstruction needs of those central American countries affected by Hurricane Mitch which they visited. [62764]

Clare Short: I refer the hon. Member to the reply I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Halton (Mr. Twigg) on 3 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *238*.

Debt Relief

22. **Mr. McNulty:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what efforts she has made to involve the churches in raising awareness of the links between debt relief and the eradication of poverty. [62765]

Clare Short: I am in regular touch with churches and representatives of other faiths on this important issue. I addressed the General Synod of the Church of England on 18 November, and called for us to join forces to construct a world-wide alliance of world faiths for the elimination of poverty during the next century. In this speech I made plain the Government's support for faster and deeper debt relief in the right circumstances. But I also make it clear that debt relief was no "magic bullet" to end all poverty, as some campaigners appear to believe. Nor should debt relief be unconditional or unilateral. Not all poor countries need debt relief, and where it is needed it should go only to those countries which are committed to the eradication of poverty. This approach has been fully endorsed by church groups and NGOs.

Crises Assistance (International Co-ordination)

23. **Mr. Pike:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made in the last 12 months on international co-ordination of assistance in response to crisis situations. [62766]

Clare Short: The United Nations' Secretary General's Track II reform process has led to improvements in inter-agency joint working and co-ordination within the international community: the UK has strongly supported this process.

The UK continues to play an important role in supporting the United Nation's disaster assessment and co-ordination (UNDAC) mechanism, including hosting, organising and contributing to disaster assessment, co-ordination and response training events, and regularly providing and meeting the costs of UK experts on UNDAC missions.

We are also working with the International Red Cross movement to strengthen their capacity to respond to emergency situations within the context of an internationally co-ordinated response system. We are also backing the efforts of non-governmental organisations to develop a code of conduct and minimum standards for humanitarian response.

Sudan

25. **Rev. Martin Smyth:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what progress has been made towards providing a corridor of tranquillity in Sudan. [62769]

Clare Short: The Inter-Governmental Authority on Development (IGAD) Technical Committee on Humanitarian Affairs met on 16 to 18 November 1998. An agreement on the operational standards for rail corridors and cross-line road corridors was signed by the Government of Sudan, the Sudan Peoples Liberation Movement and the UN. Further work is being undertaken to put this agreement into effect.

Child Labour

26. **Mr. Gordon Prentice:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps she is taking to promote the outlawing of child labour. [62770]

Clare Short: We are supporting the International LabourOrganisation's work aimed at producing a new International Convention on the Worst Forms of Child Labour which we hope will be agreed by all members of the ILO at the International Labour Conference in June 1999. This will cover forms of labour which enslave, corrupt, maim and kill children and young people under the age of 18.

We are also working with developing country governments and international organisations to help tackle the problem in practical ways because in many countries despite laws against child labour, children from very poor families—often female headed—work as a result of extreme poverty. Programmes are needed to enable their parents to work for a better income and to provide schooling for children. Examples include a project in Sialkot to provide social support for children leaving the football stitching industry. We are also discussing with ILO's International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour a possible programme on child labour in small-scale mining in Tanzania. Earlier this year we provided a grant of $1 million to IPEC to help take forward their programmes.

Kosovo

27. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will make a statement on her Department's humanitarian work in Kosovo. [62771]

Clare Short: We have worked closely with international organisations, such as United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), to ensure that the humanitarian needs of those affected by the conflict in Kosovo are met. We have so far provided £3 million for this purpose.

A Department for International Development mission visited the Former Republic of Yugoslavia and Albania between 16–26 November to assess conditions on the ground and the state of aid co-ordination. A humanitarian disaster has been averted, but the situation remains serious and must be monitored carefully. The internally displaced persons who were living out of doors are now back under shelter. The international response is generally adequate to meet current emergency needs of displaced people and refugees for food, blankets, stoves, mattresses and fuels. It is vital that this current level of humanitarian operations be maintained.

AIDS (Africa)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what proposals she has to promote support through market mechanisms for research on pharmaceutical products to combat AIDS in Africa. [62754]

Clare Short: Finding safe and effective vaccines, microbicides that prevent sexual infection and low cost means to reduce mother to child transmission are vital elements of efforts to reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS. The UK is supporting national and international initiatives to establish incentives for product discovery and product development in poor countries. Left to themselves, market forces will not develop products for the poorest countries. The UK is collaborating with the World Bank in exploring and devising market support mechanisms necessary for industry to engage in developing vaccines and other products of benefit to the poorer countries. This work is still in its early stages.

Colombia

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what representations she has received on the situation of street children in Colombia. [64178]

Clare Short: I have not received any representations on the specific situation of street children in Colombia. However, I recognise the severe problems faced by street children. In Colombia we provide support for two street children projects through the DFID Small Grants Scheme and through our Joint Funding Scheme supports a Save the Children Fund project aimed at improving regional policy towards child rights.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the projects that her Department is supporting in Colombia. [64181]

Clare Short: The projects that DFID currently support in Colombia are as follows:

Groundwater Pollution Control Project;

Integrated Coffee Pest Management;

SENA Post Fruit Handling;

Efficiency Unit Project;

London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine—link on a programme to assess intensive care provision.

We also provide funding for technical co-operation training, Chevening awards, and through DFID's Joint Funding Scheme and the DFID Small Grants Scheme which is administered by the British Embassy in Bogota.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* the countries she has visited since 1 May 1997, *(b)* the duration of her stay in those countries and *(c)* the cost of travel to those countries. [63542]

Clare Short: Ministers are required under the terms of the Ministerial Code always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. The rules on travel for Ministers are the same as those that applied under the previous Administration. The details requested are as follows:

Country	*Duration*	*Cost (£)*	*Purpose*
Thailand	14 September 1997	5,808	To visit DFID projects
South Africa	5 October 1997	4,303	To visit DFID projects
France	22 October 1997	169	Meetings with UNESCO
Sweden	27 October 1997	542	To attend meetings on International Solidarity
Belgium	20 October 1997	386	To attend the Development Council
Belgium	10 November 1997	201	To attend General Affairs Council
France	19 November 1997	523	To visit the European Parliament
Belgium	27 November 1997	390	To attend the Development Council
Canada	2 December 1997	2,694	To attend the signing of the Land mines Treaty
Germany	9 December	732	Pre-presidency meeting
Italy	11 December	1,106	Pre-presidency meeting
Portugal	15 December	1,229	Pre-presidency meeting
Malawi	1–8 January 1998	7,699	To inspect DFID projects
Bosnia	2–3 February 1998	8,975	To inspect DFID projects
Belgium	17 March 1998	1,001	EU Seminar on 21st Century
France	21 March	1,448	Ministerial meeting on Water & Sustainable Development
Switzerland	17–26 March	1,012	UN meetings
Belgium/France/Germany	30 March-2 April	893	EU Parliament General Affairs/Lecture
France	7–8 April	1,220	OECD Development Affairs
USA	14–18 April	6,469	IMF & IBRD meetings
Barbados/Guyana	7–11 May	4,740	ACP/EU Ministerial meetings

Country	Duration	Cost (£)	Purpose
Belgium	18–19 May	404	European Council Development Council meetings
Switzerland	2 June	961	ILO meetings
Luxembourg	8 June	872	GAC meeting
Vietnam/China	11–18 June	10,832	To visit DFID projects
Luxembourg	28–29 June	1,024	GAC meeting
South Africa/Mozambique	19–27 July	11,140	To visit DFID projects
Tanzania	24–28 August	4,649	To inspect DFID projects
Ghana	6–9 September	7,924	To inspect DFID projects
USA	5–6 October	8,827	World Bank Development Committee meetings
Japan	17–20 October	13,140	TICAD 11 meetings
Nepal	12–16 November	10,089	To inspect DFID projects
Germany	23 November	802	Meeting with German Development Minister
Belgium	30 November	519	European Parliament Development Council meetings
USA	10–11 December	8,645	To attend UN meetings

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* the countries which the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for International Development has visited since 1 May 1997, *(b)* the duration of his stay in those countries and *(c)* the cost of travel to those countries. [63541]

Clare Short: Ministers are required under the terms of the Ministerial Code always to make efficient and cost-effective travel arrangements. The rules on travel for Ministers are the same as those that applied under the previous Administration. The details requested are as follows:

Country	Duration	Cost(£)	Purpose
1997			
Canada	20–22 May	2,798	Caribbean Development Bank Annual Meeting
Luxembourg	5 June	464	EU Development Council
Botswana/South Africa	28–31 July	4,670	Commonwealth Education Conference and DFID Programme visit
Monsterrat	1–3 September	2,493	DFID Programme visit
Italy	7 October	755	Desertification Conference
Switzerland	13 October	448	UNHCR Annual Executive Committee Meeting
Ukraine	24–26 November	1,344	DFID Programme Visit
1998			
France	13 January	289	OECD Meeting
Bahamas	10–13 February	2,922	FCO Caribbean Forum
Belgium	26 February	299	European Parliament Meetings
Colombia	15–19 March	4,077	Inter-American Development Bank Annual Meeting and DFID programme visit
Mauritius	20–22 April	5,210	ACP-EU Forum
Ukraine	11 May	1,382	EBRD Annual Meeting
Grenada	13–14 May	2,319	Caribbean Development Bank Annual Meeting
Belgium	18 May	547	EU Development Council
Bulgaria	1–2 June	1,099	DFID Programme visit
Switzerland	6 June	477	ICRC Conference
France	9 June	273	National Assembly Debate
Russia	2–7 July	1,078	DFID Programme visit
Brazil	21–24 September	6,077	DFID Programme visit
Belgium	30 September	458	ACP/EU Negotiations
France	6–7 October	369	World Conference on Higher Education
Fiji	12–14 November	[1]6,304	DFID Programme visit
New Zealand	15–21 November	[1]—	CPA Conference
Belgium	28 October	309	European Parliament Meetings
Jordan	3 November	—	DFID Programme visit
West Bank and Gaza	4–5 November	1,877	DFID Programme visit
South Africa	2–4 December	4,670	ACOPS Conference and DFID Programme visit

[1] Same invoice

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans she has to include Irish as a category in her Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63881]

Clare Short: Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin and not nationality. The ethnic origin categories monitored by my Department are those used in the 1991 census which did not include an Irish category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Maternal Health Projects

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list *(a)* by project and *(b)* by country, the maternal health projects her Department supports. [64173]

Clare Short: We directly support maternal health projects and programmes in around 20 countries, mainly in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. A list will be placed in the Libraries of the House. It includes support for national safe motherhood programmes in Malawi and Nepal. It does not, however, include the maternal health work of multilateral organisations such as the World Health Organisation, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United Nations Population Fund, the European Community and the World Bank, or international civil society groups such as the International Planned Parenthood Federation, all of which receive substantial support from the UK's Department for International Development.

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her Department's budget is allocated to improving maternal health in developing countries. [64177]

Clare Short: In calendar year 1997, 3.6 per cent. of the UK overseas development assistance (£73 million) was invested in reproductive health, excluding expenditure through the EC and the World Bank, which we are unable to dis-aggregate. We estimate that around 15 per cent. of this spend was invested directly in reducing the dangers of pregnancy and childbirth. But clearly our spending on improving basic healthcare systems also benefit material health. We are reforming the Department's management information system to track all spending in relation to the International Development Goals. This will include a dedicated marker for contributions to reduced maternal mortality.

Hemp Industry

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what plans her Department has to support the development of the hemp industry into the production of industrial fibre. [64175]

Clare Short: While my Department has been active in the development and use of many vegetable fibre crops—e.g. jute, flax, sisal; it currently has no plans to support the hemp (*Cannabis sativa*) fibre industry in any developing country.

Palestinians (Aid)

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what is the current level of financial assistance the Government are providing to the Palestinians. [63860]

Clare Short: During the last financial year (1997–98), the Department for International Development (DFID) invested £30 million in development cooperation with the Palestinians. This comprised £16 million through DFID's direct programme in the West Bank and Gaza and contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees and £14 million in contributions to the EC's programmes for assistance for the Palestinians. DFID expects to spend a similar amount this financial year. In addition, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Department of Trade and Industry provided some small scale assistance totalling just over £50,000.

Ethical Trading

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will list the companies which have agreed to join the Ethical Trading Initiative. [64176]

Clare Short: The following companies have joined the Ethical Trading Initiative or have agreed to join and are in the process of doing so:

B&Q Plc.
CWS ("The Co-op")
J. Sainsbury Ltd.
Littlewoods
Pentland Group Plc.
Premier Brands
Reebok International Ltd.
Somerfield Stores Ltd.
Tesco
The Body Shop International.

In addition, a substantial number of other companies have expressed an interest in the Ethical Trading Initiative, especially since its annual conference which took place earlier this month, but I understand they are still deciding whether to become members. A number of NGOs and unions are also members and my Department has provided financial support to the ETI. I strongly commend all companies with supply chains in developing countries to consider joining.

Copies of ETI's base code and membership information have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Education Budgets

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what percentage of her Department's budget is spent on education projects. [64172]

Clare Short: The percentage of identifiable expenditure under my Department's bilateral programme spent on education (including scholarships) for developing countries in 1997 was 11 per cent. and is expected to be the same in 1998. It is not possible to identify the percentage of expenditure spent on education under our contributions to multilateral programmes.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

European Communities Expenditure

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will place in the Library a copy of the vade-mecum for the European Communities budget line B2–5122. [64188]

Ms Quin: The vade-mecum for budget line B2–5122 can be found in Official Journal No. 44 (Volume 41) published on 16 February 1998, a copy of which is available in the House Library.

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs for what reason European Communities budget lines (i) B3–300 and (ii) B3–301 are not broken down by member state; what elements of

these budget lines are known by his Department to have been distributed in the United Kingdom; and for what purpose. [64094]

Ms Quin: The Commission is not obliged by either Regulation or Treaty to maintain its accounts broken down by Member State for budget lines B3–300 and B3–301. the Commission is also not obliged, as a matter of course, to inform Member States which individuals or organisations have received information services or devolved funding. Official Journal No. L44 (Volume 41) published on 16 February 1998, a copy of which is available in the House Library, gives an explanation of the purpose of each Community budget line.

B3–300 covers a range of information measures including opinion polling, impact assessment, sponsored visits, publications, TV productions and internet sites. B3–301 funds, in the UK, European Document Centres in university libraries (45) and European Information Centres providing business intelligence on operating in the EU (21). The information held in these various centres generally includes UK Government publications, as well as EU documents and academic and commercial literature and databases.

European Information Association

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list those publications from the European Information Association to which his Department subscribes; and if he will arrange for copies to be placed in the Library. [64093]

Ms Quin: This Department subscribes to the following European Information Association publications: European Information; EIA update. These are available in the House Library.

Treaty of Amsterdam

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the matters currently being discussed by European Community working groups which await treaty base pending the ratification of the treaty of Amsterdam; and what level of representation his Department provides to these groups. [64193]

Ms Quin: On 30 November 1998, the Presidency of the Council of Ministers published an interim progress report on the work in hand for the implementation of the Treaty of Amsterdam. This list covers work in the areas of Justice and Home Affairs, external EU relations/CFSP and Institutional questions. Work in these areas involve officials in the working groups and Ambassadors and Ministers as appropriate. I have placed a copy of the Presidency paper in the Libraries of the House.

Turkish Parliamentarians (Imprisonment)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what recent discussions he has had with the Turkish Government on the imprisonment of *(a)* Mrs. Leyla Zana and *(b)* other members of the Turkish Parliament; and if he will make a statement. [64121]

Ms Quin: We have raised the imprisonment of Ms Zana and the other former Democracy (DEP) Party MPs with the Turkish authorities on a number of occasions. We have repeatedly stressed to the Turkish government that the prosecution of democratically elected politicians for the non-violent expression of their views is wrong, and damages Turkey's international standing.

I also refer my hon. Friend to the reply given in another place by my noble Friend the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State on 3 December 1998, *Official Report, House of Lords*, columns 596–98.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63872]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: The overriding principle of Civil Service recruitment procedures is that they should be fair, and selection should be on merit at each stage.

Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin, and not nationality. The nine ethnic origin categories monitored by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office are those used in the 1991 census, which did not include an Irish category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Dalit Community

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what representations the Government have made to the Indian Government on human rights issues in relation to the Dalit community. [63867]

Mr. Fatchett: During my visit to India in November I raised human rights issues with the Indian authorities, including attacks on minority communities. I also mentioned our concerns about religious freedom and tolerance. We will continue to make clear to the Government of India our commitment to human rights.

Abdullah Ocalan

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what consultations he has held with EU ministers over the arrest of Abdullah Ocalan in Italy. [63861]

Ms Quin: Prime Minister D'Alema of Italy raised the issue of the arrest of Abdullah Ocalan during his talks in London with my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on 30 November.

European Union Foreign Ministers also discussed the issue briefly at the General Affairs Council in Brussels on 7 December.

Turkey

Mr. Menzies Campbell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on the United Kingdom's relations with Turkey. [63896]

Ms Quin: We attach great importance to our relations with Turkey and value our dialogue on a wide range of issues.

We have been working with the Austrian Presidency of the European Union and our EU Partners to develop the European Strategy for Turkey to enhance relations between Turkey and the Union.

Prime Ministerial Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs on what occasions British prime ministers have visited *(a)* Poland, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* the Czech Republic, *(d)* Slovenia and *(e)* Estonia in the last 10 years. [63562]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: In the last 10 years, British Prime Ministers made the following visits:

a) Poland

May 1988

May 1992

August 1994

b) Hungary

September 1990

May 1992

December 1994

c) Czech Republic

September 1990

May 1992

April 1996.

Note:

Prior to January 1993, the Czech Republic was part of Czechoslovakia.

No visits were made, in the last 10 years, to Slovenia or Estonia.

Heads of Government Visits

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what reports he has received from United Kingdom embassies about the numbers and occasions of visits of heads of Government of other EU countries to *(a)* Poland, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* the Czech Republic, *(d)* Slovenia and *(e)* Estonia since each of these countries submitted their formal applications for membership of the EU. [63561]

Ms Quin: British Embassies in Central Europe keep the FCO regularly informed of significant events in their host countries, including major inward visits. I am listing indicative details of visits made by heads of government of other European Union member states to the five Central European countries currently engaged in accession negotiations. The list for each applicant country covers the period since it formally applied for EU membership. Although careful efforts were made in compiling the lists to include all visits for which the FCO has records, it is possible some visits were made that are not reflected in the materials available to the FCO.

My right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary place importance on developing strong bilateral relations between Britain and the countries of Central Europe. Visits at all levels play an important part in fostering these relationships. My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has visited seven of the ten Central European countries that have applied for membership. He has met all his opposite numbers and has hosted all but the most recently appointed Central European Foreign Ministers.

Czech Republic

Visits by other EU Member state heads of government—since 17 January 1996

French Prime Minister, Lionel Jospin, November 1998

Luxembourg Prime Minister, Jean-Claude Juncker, August 1997

Netherlands Prime Minister, Wim Kok, March 1997

German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, January 1997

Estonia

Visits by other EU Member state heads of government—since 24 November 1995

Irish Prime Minister, Bertie Ahern, April 1998

Italian Prime Minister, Romano Prodi, February 1998

Swedish Prime Minister, Goran Persson, December 1997

Finnish Prime Minister, Paavo Lipponen, November 1997

Swedish Prime Minister, Goran Persson, April 1996

Finnish Prime Minister, Paavo Lipponen, January 1996

Hungary

Visits by other EU Member state heads of government—since 31 March 1994

Italian Prime Minister, Romano Prodi, May 1998

Portuguese Prime Minister, Antonio Guterres, March 1998

Austrian Chancellor, Viktor Klima, March 1997

Austrian Chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, October 1996

Greek Prime Minister, Costas Simitis, October 1996

Austrian Chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, June 1996

Austrian Chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, April 1994

German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, April 1994

Poland

Visits by other EU Member state heads of government—since 5 April 1994

German Chancellor, Gerhard Schroeder, November 1998

Finnish Prime Minister, Paavo Lipponen, October 1998

German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, October 1998

Swedish Prime Minister, Goran Persson, March 1998

German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, February 1998

Spanish Prime Minister, Jose Maria Aznar, January 1998

Italian Prime Minister, Romano Prodi, March 1997

Danish Prime Minister, Poul Nyrup Rasmussen, March 1997

Swedish Prime Minister, Goran Persson, September 1996

Portuguese Prime Minister, Antonio Guterres, September 1996

Austrian Chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, July 1996

Austrian Chancellor, Franz Vranitzky, October 1995

Italian Prime Minister, Silvio Berlusconi, October 1995

German Chancellor, Helmut Kohl, July 1995

Belgium Prime Minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene, January 1995

French Prime Minister, Eduard Balladur, July 1994

Slovenia

Visits by other EU Member state heads of government visits—since 10 June 1996

Italian Prime Minister, Massimo D'Alema, December 1998

Belgian Prime Minister, Jean-Luc Dehaene, June 1998

Austrian Chancellor, Viktor Klima, October 1997

Italian Prime Minister, Romano Prodi, March 1997

European Parliament (Elections)

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, pursuant to his answer of 1 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *161*, on European elections, if he will list the terms of the mandate

given to the General Affairs Group by the Committee of Permanent Representatives; by whom that mandate was approved; and what is Her Majesty's Government's policy towards the European Parliament's proposed common principles. [64095]

Ms Quin: The Committee of Permanent Representatives made the procedural decision to ask the General Affairs Group to examine the European Parliament's proposal for common principles for European elections with a view to making recommendations to the General Affairs Council. The principle of proportional representation is in line wit the Government's plan for changes to the system for European parliamentary elections in Great Britain. The Government therefore supports the broad aim of the proposal, thought the detailed issues remain to be resolved.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Justice and Home Affairs Council

Mr. Rammell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the outcome of the Justice and Home Affairs Council held in Brussels on 3 and 4 December; and if he will make a statement. [63165]

Kate Hoey: My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and I represented the United Kingdom at the Council. As the details of the main matters dealt with are lengthy, they have been placed in the Library.

Child Curfews

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what estimate he has made of the number of local child curfews which will be introduced in the next year; and if he will make a statement. [63686]

Mr. Boateng: Local child curfews are a permissive rather than a mandatory power. The decision to apply for a local child curfew scheme is one for an individual local authority. A curfew notice would be applied only where a local authority identifies a problem involving disruptive children and decides to intervene. The number of curfew notices imposed annually will therefore reflect the nature of youth crime problems as identified locally.

Local child curfews should be seen within the context of a general community safety strategy. The aim of such curfews is two fold. They will address the need to protect young children from being drawn into anti-social or criminal behaviour, and they will protect communities from the misery and distress which can be caused by groups of unsupervised children.

Law and Order

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many responses were received and from whom, to the consultation documents, "Joining Forces to Protect the Public", and "The Future Organisation of Family Courts". [63927]

Mr. Boateng: The number of responses we have received by 14 December to the two consultation documents, "Joining Forces to Protect the Public" and "The Future Organisation of Court Welfare Services", and the category within which the respondents fall, are as detailed:

Joining forces to protect the public

Category	*Number of replies received*
Members of Parliament	14
Probation committees and services	59
Probation representative groups	15
Sentencers, courts and associated representative organisations	48
Police forces and representative groups	18
Crown Prosecution Service	1
Other partnership agencies	16
Individual members of probation staff	9
Local Authority sources	31
Health Authorities	4
Others and the public	51
Total	266

Additionally, the Prison Service has conducted an internal consultation exercise including meetings with about 250 area managers, governors and others.

The future organisation of Court Welfare Services

Category	*Number of replies received*
Members of Parliament	0
Probation committees and services	61
Probation representative groups	6
Probation personnel	20
Guardian ad litem and reporting officer (GALRO) panels/GALRO panel committees	68
Local Authority sources	40
Guardian ad litem and reporting officer (GALRO) personnel	2
The judiciary—judges/designated judges/family court business committees	18
The legal profession (including associations)	21
Clerks to the justices/justices clerks' society/magistrates courts	26
The court service	6
Government departments/non-departmental public bodies	2
Voluntary organisations/partnership agencies	30
The public	10
Others/academics	8
Total	318

Some responses were submitted by one agency on behalf of interagency groups. The table illustrates the range of responses received.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63920]

Mr. Straw: The total expenditure since May 1997 is £3,446,000, broken down as follows:

(a) public opinion research £179,000

(b) television, newspaper and radio advertising £3,267,000

(c) direct mail £ nil.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63874]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: It is an overriding principle of Civil Service recruitment procedures that they should be fair and that selection should be on merit.

Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin and not nationality. The nine ethnic minority origin categories monitored by my Department are based on those used in the 1991 census which did not include Irish as a category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Shotgun Licences

Mr. Öpik: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department in what circumstances a shotgun licence can be revoked; what guidelines have been issued to the police concerning the revocation of shotgun licences; and if he will make a statement. [63983]

Mr. Boateng: Under section 30(c) of the Firearms Act 1968 (as amended), a shotgun certificate may be revoked by the chief officer of police for the area in which the holder resides if he is satisfied that the holder is prohibited by this Act from possessing a shotgun or cannot be permitted to possess a shotgun without danger to public safety or to the peace. The Home Office issued general guidance on this subject in the publication 'Firearms Law: Guidance to the Police' in 1989. A person aggrieved by a decision to revoke a certificate may appeal to the Crown Court against the police decision.

The Government will keep all controls on firearms under close scrutiny.

National Assembly for Wales

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department which of his Department's expenditure responsibilities will be transferred to the National Assembly for Wales once that body has been established. [63658]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Government of Wales Act 1998 provided for a Transfer of Functions Order to be made to transfer Ministerial functions to the National Assembly for Wales. This Order was published in draft for consultation on 12 November. Until the content of the order has been finalised, it is not possible to state with certainty what functions and associated expenditure will transfer.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what has been the cost to Essex County Council of maintaining illegal immigrants who arrived at Harwich Ferry Port in each of the last three years; [64219]

(2) what has been the cost to Kent County Council of maintaining illegal immigrants who arrived at Dover Ferry Port in each of the last three years; [64218]

(3) what has been the cost to *(a)* Dorset County Council and *(b)* Poole Borough Council of maintaining illegal immigrants who arrived at Poole Ferry Port in each of the last three years. [64220]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This information is not available to the Home Office. The hon. Member should approach the local authority.

Illegal immigrants who do not claim asylum and who have no special needs are not eligible for support from public funds. Asylum seekers and other illegal immigrants (who are given temporary leave to enter) who are not otherwise detained and who are able to support themselves are free to live within the United Kingdom in a place of their own choosing. Asylum seekers who register their application for asylum at their port of entry may be eligible for Income Support and Housing Benefit and can then find their own accommodation. Asylum seekers who do not qualify for benefits but who may be supported under the terms of the National Assistance Act 1948 or the Children Act 1989 are supported by local authorities under the terms of that legislation. The Home Office currently has no role in providing support and is consequently not aware of the information sought. The Government plan a fundamental reform of the asylum and immigration laws to remove cash benefits and more strictly control where asylum seekers live.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many illegal immigrants who arrived at *(a)* Dover, *(b)* Harwich, *(c)* Portsmouth and *(d)* Newhaven are currently being detained; and what the equivalent figures were for each of the last six months. [64238]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information relating to the numbers of persons detained solely under Immigration Act powers, as at 14 December 1998, who have been served with a notice of illegal entry is that: 140 of those persons had been issued with illegal entry papers by the South East Ports Surveillance Team based at Dover; 5 by immigration officers at Harwich; 5 at Portsmouth; and none at Newhaven. Information relating to the previous six months could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many citizens of *(a)* Albania, *(b)* Bulgaria, *(c)* Hungary, *(d)* Macedonia and *(e)* Romania are currently being detained in the United Kingdom as illegal immigrants; and what the equivalent figures were for each of the last three years. [64241]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will write to the hon. Member.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many illegal immigrants at *(a)* Portsmouth, *(b)* Newhaven, *(c)* Harwich and *(d)* Plymouth ferry ports have been refused entry and removed from the United Kingdom within seven days of arrival in each of the last 12 months. [64239]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information relating to the numbers of persons removed or departing voluntarily within seven days of being issued with a notice of illegal entry by the requested ports which issued the notices, between 1 July 1997 and 30 June 1998, is given in the table.

Number of illegal entrants recorded as removed or departing voluntarily [1] within 7 days of being issued with notice of illegal entry by selected port issuing notice of illegal entry July 1997 to June 1998

Date	Portsmouth	Newhaven	Harwich	Plymouth
Jul 1997	7	—	5	—
Aug 1997	3	—	[2]—	—
Sep 1997	3	—	18	—
Oct 1997	11	—	[2]—	4
Nov 1997	5	—	—	—
Dec 1997	[2]—	—	—	—
Jan 1998	14	[2]—	[2]—	—
Feb 1998	[2]—	—	[2]—	[2]—
Mar 1998	5	—	—	—
Apr 1998	10	—	—	—
May 1998	—	—	—	—
Jun 1998	9	—	4	—

[1] Persons who departed 'voluntarily' following the initiation of illegal entry action against them.
[2] Represents 1 or 2.

Asylum Seekers

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many citizens of *(a)* Albania, *(b)* Hungary, *(c)* Macedonia, *(d)* Romania and *(e)* Slovenia have sought political asylum in the United Kingdom in the last three months; how many applications have been accepted; and what were the equivalent figures for each of the last three years. [64240]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is given in the table.

Applications [1] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and initial decisions on applications, August to October 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 for nationals of Albania, Hungary, Macedonia, Romania and Slovenia

	Total applications	Total decisions	Grants of asylum	Grants of ELR	Total refusals
1995					
Albania	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Hungary	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Macedonia	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Romania	200	235	—	—	235
Slovenia	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
1996					
Albania	35	10	—	—	10
Hungary	*	5	—	—	5
Macedonia	5	10	—	—	10
Romania	115	195	—	*	195
Slovenia	10	—	—	—	—
1997 [2]					
Albania	125	40	*	*	35
Hungary	—	*	—	—	—
Macedonia	5	—	—	—	—
Romania	175	220	*	*	220
Slovenia	5	—	—	—	—
1998 [2]					
Albania	190	65	—	—	65
Hungary	—	—	—	—	—
Macedonia	5	—	—	—	—
Romania	285	295	—	—	295
Slovenia	—	—	—	—	—

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 5, with * = 1 or 2.
[2] Provisional figures.

Domestic Violence

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent discussions he has had with police forces about domestic violence; and what plans he has to ensure better police protection for women threatened by domestic violence. [63906]

Mr. Boateng: Home Office officials maintain regular contact with the lead representatives of the Association of Chief Police Officers on domestic violence.

Before too long, I expect to be able to publish two Home Office-sponsored research reports on domestic violence policing. Their recommendations and other guidance will be disseminated next year to police forces throughout England and Wales.

E-mail Service Providers

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what are the limits on the information which the police can demand from service providers in respect of e-mail without the need to secure approval from him. [63792]

Mr. Straw: Under the Interception of Communications Act 1985, e-mail in the course of its transmission over the public telecommunications network may be intercepted only under a warrant issued by the Secretary of State or for one of the limited purposes in section 1(2) or 1(3) of the Act. E-mail held by an Internet Service Provider is subject to data protection legislation and any conditions in the service provider's licence. It is open to the police to apply for a court order in order to obtain any e-mail retained by an Internet Service Provider.

Signals Interception

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the legislative framework relating to the interception of signals connecting *(a)* mobile phones, *(b)* pagers and *(c)* interactive cable TV services. [63559]

Mr. Straw: The Interception of Communications Act 1985 provides that communications may lawfully be intercepted in the course of their transmission by means of a public telecommunications system only in obedience to a warrant issued by the Secretary of State or in certain other circumstances specified in section 1(2) and (3) of the Act. This applies equally to mobile and fixed public telecommunications systems and to interactive cable TV services.

The question whether a communication is, at the point of interception, on the public or the private side of a telecommunications system is a point of fact which has received some measure of clarification by the Courts. I have announced the intention to legislate to bring so-called "private side interception" within the law on interception.

Pagers operate by wireless telegraphy and, as such, are covered by section 5 of the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1949. This provides that it is an offence to use Wireless Telegraphy intending to obtain information about the contents of a message, its sender or the recipient, except under the authority of the Secretary of State or in the course of a person's duty as a servant of the Crown. As police officers are not, in law, servants of the Crown in England and Wales, police applications to intercept pagers in the course of criminal investigations are warranted by the my Department under my authority.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will list the offices or agencies under his control which will be subject to L.2 of Head L in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998; how many people are currently employed in these offices; and what equal opportunities practices are adopted in these offices. [63794]

Mr. Straw: Schedule 5 refers to reserved matters. Work is in train to agree secondary legislation on the specification of cross-border public authorities. Until that work is completed, it is not possible to say how many people are employed in these offices or what specific equal opportunities practices are adopted. My Department is committed to a policy of equal opportunities for all staff, regardless of ethnic origin, religious belief, sex, sexual orientation, disability or any other irrelevant factor.

WALES

Coalfield Regeneration

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much money is currently planned to be spent on the regeneration of coalfield communities in Wales. [62619]

Mr. Hain: The needs of deprived areas, which include communities within former coalfields, of the South Wales Valleys and North East Wales, are taken into account in the various spending programmes of the Welsh Office. Specific programmes, directed to these areas to tackle social, economic and environmental regeneration, include nearly £30 million in 1998–99 under Welsh Challenge and the Strategic Development Scheme; £337,000 in 1998–2000 on the 4 of the 8 approved "People in Communities" pilots in these areas aimed at tackling; and nearly £20 million by the WDA on reclaiming 370 hectares of land, the majority of which is in former coal mining areas. An estimated £10 million of New Deal funding for Wales is expected to be spent in the Employment Service Districts covering Welsh coalfields areas in 1998–99.

The share for Wales of the recently announced endowment in lieu of the £10 million surplus from the miners' pension fund will be used to fund further projects in former coalmining areas. The South Wales Valleys are part of the area of Wales which is set to gain Objective 1 status, bringing access to a substantial package of European aid.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Meat Imports

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will ensure that imported *(a)* pork and *(b)* chicken has not been reared and fed on bonemeal or other animal by-products. [63835]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* No. The ban on meat and bonemeal in pig and chicken feed in the United Kingdom is to prevent cross contamination of ruminant feed with meat and bonemeal incorporated into feed for other farm animals. There is, therefore, no basis on which it would be reasonable to restrict imports of pig meat or chicken. However, my hon. Friend may be aware that the Government have received undertakings from the major retailers that all own label fresh pork, bacon, ham and sausages sold in their supermarkets will come from meat and bonemeal (and stall and tether) free production systems.

Eggs

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many visits by MAFF personnel have been undertaken to intensive egg production units since 1 May 1997; and what percentage of these have been unannounced. [63643]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Visits by Ministry personnel to intensive egg production units, as distinct from packing stations, are basically those undertaken by members of the State Veterinary Service in relation to animal welfare. 272 welfare visits have been undertaken since 1 May 1997. Of these, 44 per cent. were undertaken in response to complaints or other indications that welfare may be poor, and in many cases were unannounced.

Battery Hens

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many prosecutions have taken place under the Welfare of Battery Hens Regulations 1987 since 1 May 1997. [63380]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The provisions originally set out in these regulations are now included in Schedule 1 of the Welfare of Livestock Regulations 1994 (SI 2126). This Department has concluded two prosecutions under that Schedule since 1 May 1997. Records of prosecutions taken by other bodies such as local authorities and the RSPCA are not kept centrally.

New Forest Fox Hounds

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if the Forestry Commission has found that the New Forest Fox Hounds were in breach of their licence as a result of events on 3 November. [62247]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* The subject of the question relates to matters undertaken by Forest Enterprise and I have asked its Chief Executive to reply to the hon. Member direct.

Letter from Bob McIntosh to Mr. Desmond Swayne, dated 16 December 1998:

I am writing in reply to your Parliamentary Question (No 62247) addressed to the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, regarding the hunting incident in the New Forest on 3 November 1998.

The Forestry Commission considers that the New Forest Fox Hounds were in breach of their licence conditions on 3 November. We have agreed with the Masters of Foxhounds Association a clarification of the particular condition that the Hunt breached to ensure that there can be no ambiguity in the event of any future occurrence.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Pensions

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the effect of the introduction of an age addition of £3 in the basic state pension for those aged between 75 and 79 years and £5 in the basic state pension for those aged over 80, and corresponding increases in the rates of premiums for means-tested benefits on *(a)* gross benefits expenditure, *(b)* net benefits expenditure and *(c)* income tax revenues. [62870]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* The information is in the table.

Full year expenditure and revenue effects of age additions in 1999–2000

£ million

	£5 age addition for 80 and over and £3 age addition for 75–79
Expenditure on Retirement Pension	910
Expenditure on means tested benefit	210
Net benefit cost	700
Income tax offsets	−60

Notes:

1. Estimates for Retirement Pension have been provided by the Government Actuary's Department.
2. Estimates for income tax revenues have been provided by Inland Revenue.
3. Means-tested benefit expenditure has been estimated using the 1995–96 Family Resources Survey uprated to 1999–2000 prices and benefits levels.
4. Estimates are in 1999–2000 prices and benefit rates, and are rounded to the nearest £10 million.
5. + cost, − savings.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what would be the effect of the introduction of an age addition to the basic state pension of £5 per week for those aged between 75 and 79 years and £10 per week for those aged over 80, on *(a)* gross benefits expenditure, *(b)* net benefits expenditure and *(c)* income tax revenues. [62871]

Mr. Denham *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* The information requested is in the table.

Full year expenditure and revenue effects of age additions in 1999/2000

£ million

	£10 age addition for 80 and over and £5 age addition for 75–79
Expenditure on Retirement Pension	1,760
Means-tested benefit offsets	−580
Net benefit cost	1,180
Income tax offsets	−120

Notes:

1. Estimates for Retirement Pension have been provided by the Government Actuary's Department.
2. Estimates for income tax revenues have been provided by Inland Revenue
3. Means-tested benefit offsets have been estimated using the 1995–96 Family Resources Survey uprated to 1999–2000 prices and benefits levels.
4. Estimates are in 1999–2000 prices and benefit rates, and are rounded to the nearest £10 million.
5. + costs, − savings.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will update his estimates based on Family Resources Survey 1996–97 of *(a)* median pensioner incomes, excluding means-tested benefits, by age, sex and marital status, consistent with his answer of 12 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *295–98*, and corresponding estimates of the size of each group, *(b)* non take-up of income support by pensioners in each age, sex and marital status group, consistent with his answer of 19 October 1998, *Official Report*, columns *597–98* *(c)* receipt of means-tested benefits and liability for income tax among pensioners, consistent with his answer of 5 November 1997, *Official Report*, columns *249–50* and *(d)* patterns of pensioner savings, consistent with his answer of 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *850–52*. [63943]

Mr. Denham: The information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many official visits *(a)* he and *(b)* the Ministers in his Department, have made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997; and if he will list them. [64129]

Mr. Denham: None.

Benefit Integrity Project

Mr. Todd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security, pursuant to his answer to the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Mr. Burstow) of 10 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *167*, if people affected by motor neurone disease will be selected for reassessment under the Benefit Integrity Project, or its replacement, regardless of the rate of disability living allowance received. [64191]

Mr. Timms: The Benefit Integrity Project (BIP) has been subject to continuous review and we have made changes based on an analysis of cases showing the rate of change in entitlement. On 23 September I announced further exemptions to the BIP, including people with Motor Neurone Disease (MND) who are receiving the higher rate of the mobility component together with the highest rate of the care component of Disability Living Allowance (DLA).

We plan to replace the BIP with a new system which is part of the routine administration of the benefit and which is both sensitive and fair. We are discussing our proposals with the Disability Benefits Forum. Contact with those with MND receiving a lower rate of DLA would allow the rate to be increased if appropriate.

Mr. Oaten: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much the Benefits Integrity Project has cost to administer for *(a)* 1997–98 and *(b)* 1998 to date. [64009]

Mr. Timms: The administration of the Benefit Integrity Project is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Mark Oaten, dated 15 December 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Questions asking how much the Benefit Integrity Project has cost to administer for (a) 1997–98 and (b) 1998 to date.

In 1997–98 the Benefit Integrity Project cost £8.27m to administer. In 1998–99, up to 31 October 1998, the project has cost £7m.

Statistical information about the Benefit Integrity Project is published on a monthly basis and is placed in the House of Commons Library.

I hope you find this reply useful.

Family Credit

Ms Harman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate *(a)* the numbers of families in receipt of family credit, *(b)* their average net pay and *(c)* the earnings of their partners comprising (i) a male as the main earner and (ii) a female as the main earner with (1) one child, (2) two children, (3) three children and (4) four or more children under eight years of age. [64228]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the tables.

Number of families receiving Family Credit, May 1998

Thousands

	All families	*Male main earner*	*Female main earner*
All families	767	315	452
With 1 child under 8	279	109	170
With 2 children under 8	141	88	53
With 3 children under 8	37	29	8
With 4 or more children under 8	7	6	1

Net earnings of family credit main earner, May 1998

£ per week

	All families	*Male main earner*	*Female main earner*
All families	100.67	113.96	91.40
With 1 child under 8	98.73	113.70	89.11
With 2 children under 8	103.34	114.73	84.63
With 3 children under 8	108.00	115.76	78.25
With 4 or more children under 8	111.91	116.60	79.24

Earnings of partners of Family Credit claimants, May 1998

£ per week

	All families	*Male main earner*	*Female main earner*
All families	41.07	38.94	45.14
With 1 child under 8	40.67	38.43	45.65
With 2 children under 8	41.10	38.07	47.92
With 3 children under 8	41.17	37.18	58.94
With 4 or more children under 8	53.87	51.83	57.94

Notes:

1. Numbers are rounded to the nearest thousand and may not sum due to totals.
2. Families may have other children who are not counted in this breakdown (aged 8 and over)
3. Families with 1 to 4 or more children under 8 do not sum to the total number of families shown as families where all of the children in the family are over 8 are not included in the table

Source:

Family Credit Quarterly Statistical Enquiry May 1998

Severe Disablement Allowance

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what proportion of current claimants of severe disablement allowance are women. [64223]

Mr. Timms: The total number of Severe Disablement Allowance (SDA) claimants in Great Britain as at 31 May 1998 is 370,720. Of these 218,740, or 59 per cent. are female.

Source:

These figures are taken from a 5 per cent. sample of SDA claimants, taken from the PSCS(INCP) system and excludes a small number of clerical cases.

Child Support

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what were the arrears of child support payments owed by self-employed non-resident parents to children living in Wolverhampton on 30 September. [63435]

Angela Eagle: We expect the Child Support Agency to provide a consistent, fair and efficient service to all its clients. We have set out proposals for radical reform in our Green Paper "Children First: a new approach to child support" (Cm3992).

The administration of the Child Support Agency is a matter for the Chief Executive, Mrs. Faith Boardman. She will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Faith Boardman to Ms Jenny Jones, dated 15 December 1998:

I am replying to your Parliamentary Question to the Secretary of State for Social Security about child support payments owed by self employed non-resident parents to children in Wolverhampton.

I cannot provide precisely all the information that you have requested, but have provided as much as possible from information available.

The Agency has six front-line Business Units; each of these consists of a Child Support Agency Centre and associated field offices. Cases where the parent with care lives in Wolverhampton are dealt with by the Midlands Business Unit for which information has been provided.

At 30 September 1998 the amount of child support full maintenance assessment debt for the Midlands Business Unit was £91,546,756. This can be broken down further to £53,371,759(58.3%) collectable debt, £35,611,688(38.9%) possibly uncollectable debt and £2,563,309(2.8%) deferred debt. Deferred debt is where the Agency has deferred the debt indefinitely, provided non-resident parents meet certain conditions on payment of regular maintenance and any remaining debt. Where appropriate the parent with care will be compensated for the loss of this money.

To further increase the flow of maintenance and to help non-resident parents pay the arrears that they owe, wherever possible the Agency makes every effort to re-schedule debts; re-scheduled debts are those where the Agency has negotiated a closely monitored agreement with the non-resident parent to pay arrears by instalments. The amount of debt re-scheduled included in the £91,546,756 at 30 September 1998 was £69,513,784.

It is not possible to say how much of this debt is owed by self employed non-resident parents, however I can tell you that 3.5% of the Midlands Business Unit's live and assessed caseload relate to cases where the non-resident parent is self employed.

The Agency acknowledges that cases where the non-resident parent is self employed can be more difficult to progress, especially where the non-resident parent does not wish to comply. The key to securing early compliance is by personal contact with our clients. By approaching clients at the initial stages of their assessment we aim to build a better relationship with them, address their concerns promptly and provide an improved level of service.

We have increased resources for our Client Helplines and the National Enquiry Line, extended our hours of opening to cover 8.00am to 8.00pm Monday to Friday and 9.00am to 5.00pm on Saturdays and carried out trials to greatly improve and increase clients' opportunities to secure a face to face service.

Additionally we have recently completed a pilot study in the South Western Business Unit, looking at how best to process self employed cases. Trials using dedicated staff dealing exclusively with the self employed have shown a marked reduction in processing time and an increase in the collection of maintenance. We intend to have specific sections, supported by accountants where necessary, in each Business Unit by March 1999 to deal exclusively with self employed customers.

Also, to assist us to trace the whereabouts of self employed non-resident parents, we are exploring the possibility of sharing information with other Agencies and Government Departments. We have also revised staff training and raised staff awareness of the Agency's self employed powers, working practices and related issues.

If all voluntary methods to secure maintenance from a self employed non-resident parent fail, a liability order is applied for. It is hoped that the threat of such action will be enough to ensure compliance. The majority do agree to make an arrangement and only in a very small minority of cases is legal action actually taken.

We will use any and all enforcement methods legally available but we experience the same difficulties as other litigants in enforcing a civil debt. During 1997/98 we have been successful in registering debt by County Court Judgement in 522 cases. Where all other action has failed, the Agency has pursued cases for prosecution; between October 1997 and March 1998 a total of 15 suspended custodial sentences were imposed. A self employed non-resident parent was committed to prison as a result of non payment of maintenance.

I hope this reply is helpful.

Written Answers to Questions

Thursday 17 December 1998

HEALTH

Care History (Children)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what criteria are used for holding care history information centrally on children in care homes. [64213]

Mr. Hutton: The Department collects anonymised statistical profiles of a one-third sample of all children who are looked after by local authorities in England, including those placed in children's homes. This information includes details of each child's placements, legal status, and reason for being looked after. A copy of the form on which these data are reported was published as an appendix to "Children Looked After by Local Authorities, Year Ending 31 March 1997, England", copies of which are available in the Library.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many official visits *(a)* he and *(b)* the Ministers in his Department have made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997; and if he will list them. [64139]

Ms Jowell: Information on visits to Buckinghamshire is shown in the table.

Date	*Minister*	*Place*
23 February 1998	Minister for Public Health right hon. Tessa Jowell	Anglia and Oxford Regional Office, Milton Keynes. Take a Break Cafe, Milton Keynes
23 March 1998	Secretary of State right hon. Frank Dobson	Two Shires Ambulance National Health Service Trust, Milton Keynes
8 April 1998	Secretary of State right hon. Frank Dobson	South Buckinghamshire NHS Trust, High Wycombe
5 October 1998	Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State Mr. Paul Boateng	Regional launch of National Priorities Guidance, Milton Keynes Council Chamber

Investing in Dentistry

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he plans to disburse the balance of funds available under Investing in Dentistry by the end of the current financial year; and if he will make a statement. [64249]

Mr. Milburn: Dispersal of the balance of funds depends on receiving bids from local health authorities and dentist that meet the criteria for grants under the investing in dentistry initiative.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Health, pursuant to his answer of 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *201–02*, on Investing in Dentistry, if he will list for each health authority area *(a)* the number of applications received, and *(b)* the gross funding awarded; and if he will make a statement. [64262]

Mr. Milburn: The table gives details of the number of Investing in Dentistry funding requests health authorities have submitted to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health, and the gross funding awarded to health authorities whose requests have been approved.

Health authority	*Number of funding requests*[1,2]	*Gross funding approved*[3] £
Avon	12	81,000
Barnet	6	—
Barnsley	5	72,900
Bedfordshire	2	30,000
Berkshire	6	85,000
Bexley and Greenwich	3	—
Birmingham	2	57,000
Bradford	4	52,700
Bury and Rochdale	2	—
Calderdale and Kirklees	4	—
Cambridge and Huntingdon	5	127,400
City and East London	8	164,000
Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly	13	301,800
County Durham	10	110,000
Coventry	1	—
Doncaster	5	32,900
Dorset	5	29,500
Dudley	1	—
Ealing, Hammersmith and Hounslow	9	112,600
East Kent	4	—
East Lancashire	15	44,000
East Norfolk	6	96,000
East Riding	13	184,500
East Sussex	3	—
Enfield and Haringey	8	—
Gloucestershire	18	172,000
Herefordshire	2	50,000
Isle of Wight	3	85,000
Kensington, Chelsea and Westminster	18	—
Lambeth, Southwark and Lewisham	7	77,700
Leeds	3	—
Leicestershire	5	29,300
Lincolnshire	2	117,000
Liverpool	2	96,000
Merton, Sutton and Wandsworth	5	34,900
Morecambe Bay	10	137,000
Newcastle and North Tyneside	7	67,400
Northamptonshire	6	50,000
North Cheshire	1	50,000
North Cumbria	14	206,600
North Derbyshire	2	60,400
North and East Devon	7	253,800
North Essex	2	37,400
North and Mid Hampshire	19	185,200
North Staffordshire	10	168,800
North West Lancashire	7	161,800
North Yorkshire	30	169,400
North West Anglia	4	—

Health authority	Number of funding requests [1,2]	Gross funding approved [3] £
Nottingham	7	35,700
Oxfordshire	7	222,000
Portsmouth and South East Hampshire	18	170,500
Redbridge and Waltham Forest	6	57,700
Rotherham	10	141,500
Salford and Trafford	2	22,300
Sandwell	8	—
St. Helens and Knowsley	7	—
Shropshire	11	221,000
Somerset	17	132,000
Southern Derbyshire	4	12,000
South Cheshire	9	155,700
South Essex	4	40,000
South Humber	3	59,000
South Lancashire	5	23,300
South Staffordshire	7	55,000
South West Devon	10	213,700
Southampton and South West Hampshire	18	306,200
Stockport	1	—
Suffolk	6	109,000
Sunderland	6	—
Tees	3	—
Walsall	3	—
Warwickshire	1	—
West Hertfordshire	2	40,000
West Kent	3	80,200
West Surrey	8	168,100
West Sussex	30	90,600
Wigan and Bolton	4	63,200
Wiltshire	20	584,800
Wirral	4	—
Wolverhampton	5	50,000
Worcestershire	5	40,000

[1] Number of requests includes re-submitted and revised applications.

[2] Some requests are still to be considered.

[3] Gross funding figures have been rounded up to the nearest hundred pounds.

GP Lists

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how many patients have been removed from general practitioners' lists in each health authority in each of the last five years. [64247]

Mr. Milburn: Information on the number of people removed from their general practitioner's list is collected annually and is published in the General Medical Practitioner Census Additional Data Collection. The latest published information relates to the year 1996–97.

Information on the number of such removals in each of the last five years will be placed in the Library.

NHS Complaints Procedures

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what was the outcome of the independent evaluation of NHS complaints procedures; and in what ways he is promoting good practice in this respect. [64484]

Mr. Milburn: A team consisting of the London Health Economics Consortium, the King's Fund and Public Attitude Surveys Ltd. was appointed to undertake the evaluation following a tender exercise earlier this year. The project will begin early in 1999 and the identification of good practice will remain a key objective.

Electrical Wheelchairs

Mr. Brake: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what budget was allocated for the provision of self-propelled indoor/outdoor, non-attendant, electrical wheelchairs in the financial year 1997–98; what was the actual expenditure on electric wheelchairs in that year; and how many self-propelled indoor/outdoor, non-attendant, electric wheelchairs were issued in that year. [64477]

Mr. Hutton: In 1997/98 the sum of £7 million was allocated to enable the National Health Service to provide electrically-powered indoor/outdoor wheelchairs. 4,500 chairs were issued in 1997/98. Total expenditure on the service, including costs such as additional assessment and training in the safe use of the chair as well as the cost of the chair, was £6,683,523.

Correspondence

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will reply to the letter from the hon. Member for Christchurch on behalf of his constituent, Mrs. King, dated 31 October, about exemption certificates for transport for medical treatment. [64442]

Mr. Milburn: I replied to the hon. Member on 11 December 1998.

Mr. Barry Horne

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what costs were incurred by York District Hospital NHS Trust as a result of the stay of Mr. Barry Horne from 24 November to 10 December and subsequently. [64449]

Mr. Milburn: The costs for caring for a specific individual are not available centrally. The hon. Member may wish to discuss the matter with the Chairman of the York Health Services National Health Service Trust.

Healthy Living Centres

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the criteria for approving healthy living centres; and when the first healthy living centres will be approved. [64543]

Ms Jowell: The criteria for approving bids for lottery funding for healthy living centres are currently being developed by the New Opportunities Fund. The fund's draft application criteria, which specifies some of the areas it plans to include in its assessment criteria, is currently out for consultation. The fund plans to begin inviting bids early in 1999 and will make its first awards as soon as possible thereafter.

Dental Services

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Health how the Government propose to alter the process of *(a)* approving new NHS dentists and *(b)* allocating the relevant funds to health authorities. [64541]

Mr. Milburn: Dentists are registered by the General Dental Council, and are then free to work for the National Health Service if they wish, anywhere in the country. Funds are not allocated to health authorities for the general dental services where the vast majority of dentists work, instead dentists claim fees from a nationally set fee

scale. Health authorities do commission community dental services and it is up to each health authority to decide how much funding to put towards these. There are some categories of dental service—personal dental services and salaried dentists—where health authorities must apply to the Department.

Prostate Cancer

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on population screening of men for prostate cancer. [64339]

Ms Jowell: In response to advice from the National Screening Committee (NSC), we advised the National Health Service in Executive Letter (97)12 that screening for prostate cancer should not be offered routinely, based on the existing evidence available. This remains the current policy. The NSC is actively keeping this question under review in the light of emerging evidence.

Cancer Treatments

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health (1) if he will estimate the annual cost to the National Health Service of screening all men above the age of 30 years for prostate cancer; [64341]

(2) if he will list the cost to the National Health Service of *(a)* a PSA blood test, *(b)* screening for cervical cancer and *(c)* screening for breast cancer; [64337]

(3) what is the annual cost to the National Health Service of screening women for *(a)* cervical cancer and *(b)* breast cancer. [64342]

Mr. Hutton: There is currently no reliable information available to make an estimate of costs for a prostate cancer screening programme.

It is estimated that the annual cost of the National Health Service breast screening programme is approximately £38 million. In 1996–97, 1.1 million women were screened, giving an approximate cost of £34.50 per woman screened.

The National Audit Office has estimated the total annual cost of the NHS cervical screening programme to be £132 million. This includes payments to general practitioners for achieving target coverage levels. In 1996–97, 3.8 million women were screened giving an approximate cost of £34 per woman screened.

Nursing Homes

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Health if he will make a statement on the use of national guidelines to protect patients' pocket money from unscrupulous nursing home owners. [64301]

Mr. Hutton: Guidance issued by the National Association of Health Authorities (now the Health Service Confederation) in 1988 advises health authorities responsible for regulating nursing homes that residents in nursing homes should, wherever possible, manage their own financial affairs.

"Home Life: a code of practice for residential care" further advises that, should residents be incapable of looking after their own finances, arrangements should be made for a friend or relative to act as an agent or appointee for the resident. A homeowner or manager of a home should not undertake this responsibility unless there is no alternative.

Any suspicion that a homeowner is misappropriating a resident's money or valuables should be referred to the police.

Antibiotics Report

Mr. Rendel: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when he will publish his response to the seventh report of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology of Session 1997–98, "Resistance to Antibiotics and their Antimicrobial Agents (HL81)". [64407]

Ms Jowell: The Government's response to the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology report on Resistance to Antibiotics has been laid before Parliament today. Copies are available in the Library.

Farming Stress and Suicide

Mr. Tyler: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what has been the cause of the delay in publishing the Department's report on farming stress and suicide, prepared by the University of London Department of Psychiatry; and if he will make a statement. [64304]

Mr. Hutton: The report commissioned by the Department on "Suicide and Stress in Farmers" was a study undertaken by Professor Keith Hawton and his team at the University of Oxford. Publication has not been delayed. The final version was received on 4 December 1998 and was published on 7 December 1998.

Medway NHS Trust

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what is the current waiting time for fitting hearing aids at Medway NHS Trust; and if he will make a statement. [64511]

Mr. Milburn: The current waiting time for fitting hearing aids at Medway National Health Service Trust is 1 month for clinically urgent cases and 6 months for routine cases.

Miss Widdecombe: To ask the Secretary of State for Health when the two vacant posts for audiology technicians at Medway NHS Trust are expected to be filled; and if he will make a statement. [64512]

Mr. Milburn: Medway National Health Service Trust recently advertised for two audiology technicians but did not receive any applications. They are re-appraising the posts in terms of grade and job content and will be re-advertising in the new year.

Social Services (Wandsworth)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Health what discussions he has had on the provision of social services in the London Borough of Wandsworth; and if he will make a statement. [64520]

Mr. Hutton: The Department, through the Social Services Inspectorate (SSI), monitors the performance of all local social services authorities. The report of a joint SSI/Audit Commission review of social services in the

London Borough of Wandsworth was published in June 1997, and the report of an SSI inspection of the safety of children looked after was published in June 1998. Copies of both reports are available in the Library. The SSI is closely monitoring progress against the action plans drawn up following both these reports.

ENVIRONMENT, TRANSPORT AND THE REGIONS

"A New Deal for Transport"

Mr. Sayeed: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the amount of extra taxation which will be received from motorists in the next three years as a result of the increases in fuel duties and the new taxes proposed in the White Paper, "A New Deal for Transport". [63473]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Chancellor announced in the July 1997 Budget a commitment to annual increases in road fuel duties averaging at least 6 per cent. in real terms. HM Customs and Excise estimates that this will raise an additional £4.4 billion over the three financial years 1998–99 to 2000–01 compared with increasing fuel duties only in line with inflation. The White Paper announced our intention to legislate to enable local authorities to introduce road user charges and workplace parking levies in their areas, and to enable the Secretary of State to introduce charges on trunk roads and motorways. The revenue raised once the legislation is in place will depend on decisions by the authorities concerned as to whether or not to introduce the new charges, and if they do, at what level to do so.

Landing Fees (Airports)

Mr. Blunt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will estimate the level of duty required on landing fees at *(a)* Heathrow and *(b)* Gatwick to balance the supply and demand for slots. [63459]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The UK is subject to a number of international obligations and conventions in respect of airport charges which embody the principle that charges are based on the cost of providing facilities and services, even if there is excess demand to use these. Landing fees account for only a small proportion of airline costs. Given the extent to which demand for slots exceeds supply at Heathrow and (to a lesser degree) Gatwick, it is logical to expect that a several fold increase would be necessary to reach the market clearing level. But the Government have not undertaken precise calculations.

Aircraft (Near Misses)

Mr. Burstow: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many near misses were reported in each quarter of 1997–98 and 1998–99 to date in *(a)* United Kingdom air space, *(b)* Greater London and *(c)* the home counties; what type of aircraft were involved in each case; and from which airport they were flying. [63362]

Ms Glenda Jackson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Information on airproxes ("near misses") is not available in the form requested. The table provides a quarterly breakdown of airproxes in UK airspace for the period requested. Details of airproxes reported by pilots are published by the Joint Airprox Working Group and controller-reported airproxes are published by the Joint Airprox Assessment Panel. When it is able to do so, the newly constituted UK Airprox Board will combine these publications into a single series covering both pilot and controller-reported incidents.

Airproxes in UK airspace

Period	*Total of all reported UK airproxes involving all aircraft types (civil and military)*	*UK risk-bearing airproxes involving all aircraft types (civil and military)*	*UK risk-bearing airproxes involving Commercial Air Transport*
January-March 1997	40	17	5
April-June 1997	68	38	13
July-September 1997	67	31	9
October-December 1997	33	14	4
January-March 1998[1]	46	16	3
April-June 1998[1]	47	16	4

[1] The 1998 figures are subject to review

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many official visits *(a)* he and *(b)* the Ministers in his Department, have made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997; and if he will list them. [64128]

Mr. Meale: Ministers in my Department have made two official visits to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997.

My noble Friend, the Minister for Roads and Road Safety opened the new Traffic Control Centre at Traffic Master's HQ in Milton Keynes on 15 October 1998 and my hon. Friend the Minister for Transport in London, visited High Wycombe to discuss integrated transport issues and visit a number of transport sites on 24 November 1998.

747 Aeroplanes

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will take steps to prohibit the landing of Type 747 aeroplanes at Heathrow Airport before 7 am on *(a)* Christmas and *(b)* New Year's day mornings. [64084]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government have no plans to do so. The Boeing 747 is widely used for trans-continental scheduled air services, including for arrivals before 7 am. Most such services operate on the basis of a minimum daily frequency. It is the Government's policy to encourage the use of quieter aircraft at night and proposals to this end are contained in the second stage consultation paper on "Night Restrictions at Heathrow, Gatwick and Stansted" which was published on 17 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *492–93*.

Social Housing

Mr. Sanders: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list in real terms *(a)* the amount of support given for social housing in the period 1992 to 1997 and *(b)* the proposed levels of support for social housing in the period 1997 to 2000. [63422]

Mr. Raynsford *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The available information on allocations or outturns for expenditure on social housing stock made by central Government since 1992–93 is set out. Allocations for 2000–2001 have not yet been finalised but, as announced in the summer following the Comprehensive Spending Review, the housing capital allocations to local authorities will increase by around £600 million in 2000–2001. Some of the resources allocated through the Single Regeneration Budget, New Deal for Communities, and City Challenge that will be used for investment in social housing are not separately identified in the allocations made.

£ million (1997–98 prices)

England	*1992–93*	*1993–94*	*1994–95*	*1995–96*	*1996–97*	*1997–98*	*1998–99*[1]	*1999–2000*
Housing corporation approved development programme								
Net outturns	2,613	1,982	1,618	1,219	1,057	680	600	606
Housing annual capital guideline allocations	1,462	1,521	1,130	1,051	968	628	529	797
Estate action outturns	394	394	406	334	259	174	96	63
Cash incentive scheme allocations	34	—	33	63	62	60	29	—
Estates renewal challenge fund capital allocations	—	—	—	—	31	93	145	149
Capital receipts initiative allocations	—	—	—	—	—	174	554	541
Other local authority allocations[2]	91	50	44	32	31	—	—	—
Management and maintenance allowances for LA stock	3,633	3,605	3,590	3,524	3,463	3,307	3,127	2,994
Housing action trusts outturns	31	86	100	98	92	88	86	84

[1] All outturns for 1998–99 are latest estimates.
[2] Covers special programmes for homelessness, rural housing, energy efficiency, new town defective dwellings, flats over shops, the housing partnership fund and the private sector initiatives.

Buenos Aires Conference

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what timetables were agreed at the Buenos Aires Climate Change Conference to implement *(a)* the clean development mechanism, *(b)* national compliance with greenhouse gas reduction targets and *(c)* technical advances on climate monitoring. [63776]

Mr. Meacher: At the fourth Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), Buenos Aires 2–13 November 1998 (COP 4), a number of decisions were taken which contained timetables for future work:

(a) on the mechanisms of the Kyoto Protocol, COP 4 agreed a work-programme with the deadline for completion of work as the sixth Conference of the Parties (COP 6), likely to take place at the end of 2000. Parties agreed to give priority within this programme to the clean development mechanism, with a view to establishing its modalities and procedures by the COP 6 deadline.

(b) on compliance, COP 4 established a working group tasked with developing a comprehensive compliance system for all obligations under the Kyoto Protocol, including national greenhouse gas targets, with a view to adopting a decision at COP 6.

(c) on climate monitoring, COP 4 invited the relevant UN and international agencies to initiate an Intergovernmental process for addressing priorities for action to improve global observing systems for climate in relation to the needs of the Convention.

Munitions (Sea Disposal)

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what discussions took place at the heads of delegation meeting for the OSPAR convention held on 12 and 13 November in London, in respect of the disposal to sea of chemical and conventional explosive munitions; and if he will place in the Library copies of the United Kingdom submissions made on this matter to OSPAR. [63902]

Mr. Meacher: As agreed at the Ministerial Meeting of the OSPAR Commission in July, the meeting of Heads of Delegation considered past dumping of chemical weapons and munitions (further dumping of this kind is, of course, prohibited by the OSPAR Convention). The meeting invited the Contracting Parties and observers to submit to the Government of the Republic of Ireland the available information on chemical weapons, munitions and related material dumped in the past, and on retrieval events, dumped material which has turned up in unexpected places and dumpings by states other than OSPAR Contracting Parties. That information will be presented by the Republic of Ireland to the Sea-Based Activities Working Group at its meeting on 15 February 1999, and the meeting of the Heads of Delegation in May will then consider what should be done. No formal papers have yet been submitted to the OSPAR Commission or the Heads of Delegation meeting on this issue.

Housing Act 1985

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to amend Part XI of the Housing Act 1985 to remove hotels, guest houses and self catering accommodation previously converted from a house which was once occupied by a single household from being categorised as houses in multiple occupation following the

recent decision by the Court of Appeal on the Living Waters Conference Centre, Conwy; and if he will make a statement. [64299]

Mr. Raynsford: We plan to issue a consultation document on proposals for a licensing scheme for houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) early in the New Year. In that paper, we will also seek views on changes to Part XI of the Housing Act 1985, including the HMO definition. However, we would be reluctant to remove from the definition any premises which provide accommodation for people who have no other home. We would also need to consider the effect on the existing powers for local authorities to make HMO registration schemes containing special control provisions.

Private Rented Accommodation

Mr. Geraint Davies: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the percentage of private rented accommodation which is let by landlords or agents who are not members of landlords' or agents' associations. [64248]

Mr. Raynsford: We do not know what percentage of private rented accommodation is let by landlords or agents who are not member of landlords' or agents' associations but we know that:

over 70 per cent. of privately rented accommodation is owned by landlords letting as a sideline, rather than by business or institutional landlords;

around 40 per cent. of lettings are managed partly or wholly by an agent of which some 2,500 are members of a professional association for agents;

a small but growing number of sideline landlords are members of local landlords' associations, private landlords' forums and local authority landlord accreditation schemes.

Eurostar

Mrs. Ellman: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what assessment he has made of the importance of Eurostar regional services to the economy of the North West; and if he will make a statement. [64280]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The Government announced on 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *135*, that they will be appointing consultants to examine the "Review of Regional Eurostar Services", produced by Inter Capital and Regional Rail Ltd. The Government intend their consultant to consider the economic and social benefits of regional Eurostar services.

Countryside Access

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he proposes to respond to the consultation process on access to the open countryside in England and Wales. [64298]

Mr. Meale: I refer the hon. Member to the answer given by my right hon. Friend the Minister for the Environment to the hon. Member for West Chelmsford (Mr. Burns) on 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *672*.

M6 (Roadworks)

Mr. Evans: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions at how many locations on the M6 there were roadworks between 10 and 11 December. [64297]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Mr. Lawrie Haynes, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from John Kerman to Mr. Nigel Evans, dated 17 December 1998:

M6 road closures—10 and 11 December

As you know the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked Lawrie Haynes, the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. You asked "at how many locations on the M6 there were roadworks between 10 and 11 December". I am replying on Lawrie Haynes' behalf in his absence from the office.

The table below sets out the information you require:

Area	*10 December 1998*	*11 December 1998*
Cheshire	4	5
Lancashire	4	3
Cumbria	2	2
Warwickshire	1	1
Total	11	11

The length of the M6 from the M1 to the A74 is 229 miles.

The figures provided are for the main running lanes only and exclude roadworks on link roads where advanced signs are erected on main carriageways and also works on the hard shoulder only, where Temporary Vertical Concrete Barriers are in place. The figures also include roadworks that took place overnight.

I trust the above information meets your requirement.

Overhead Power Lines

Miss McIntosh: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his Department's policy on planning guidelines in respect of applications to build houses close to overhead power lines. [64288]

Mr. Raynsford: Draft guidance on determining planning applications for development proposed in vicinity to sources of electro-magnetic fields, such as overhead power lines, is contained in the draft circular, "Land-Use Planning and Electro-Magnetic Fields (EMFs)". This has been drawn up jointly by this Department and the Department of Health, and was issued for public consultation on 8 December.

Pensions

Mr. Pearson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions (1) what information his Department collects on *(a)* the numbers of those directly employed through the single regeneration budget programme and *(b)* the proportion of those directly employed who are in occupational pension schemes or receive personal pension contributions; [64393]

(2) if he will make a statement on pensions for staff directly employed by the Single Regeneration Budget programme; [64394]

(3) what restrictions are placed on bodies receiving SRB funding who employ people directly from offering occupational pension schemes or contributions to personal pensions from the SRB programme. [64392]

Mr. Meale: The SRB provides support for between one to seven years for regeneration schemes by locally based partnerships. The SRB contribution towards management and administration costs has a ceiling of 5 per cent. of total SRB grant for the scheme. It is for the partnerships themselves to determine the terms and conditions of any staff they employ directly and there are no restrictions imposed by the SRB. My Department does not collect information on the number of staff directly employed through the SRB programme. It is the Government's view, as recently reaffirmed by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Social Security, that everyone who can save for their retirement has a responsibility to do so.

Genetically Modified Crops

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will place in the Library a copy of the report commissioned by Ministers to assess the potential effects of cultivating genetically modified food in Britain; and if he will make a statement. [64329]

Mr. Meacher: As outlined in the response to the hon. Gentleman's earlier question of 9 February 1998, *Official Report*, column *11*, we undertook to have further discussions with English Nature and others on how concerns regarding the possible wider implications of genetically modified crops may best be addressed. As a result of these discussions, DETR officials have been preparing a draft paper considering the possible wider impact of genetically modified crops on farmland wildlife. The potential impact is considered in the context of existing agricultural practices and the Government's commitments to reverse wildlife declines in farmland. The potential advantages or disadvantages of genetically modified crops will be discussed.

This paper is being prepared in consultation with the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment (ACRE) and English Nature. As explained in my reply to my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham, South (Mr. Simpson) on 5 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *638*, regarding ACRE's remit, the Secretary of State has asked the Advisory Committee on Releases to the Environment to advise on the possible changes in agronomic practice and subsequent effects on biodiversity that may result from the release of genetically modified organisms.

When the paper is completed it will be made publicly available.

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions in how many trials of genetically modified crops inspected in 1998 the regulations governing their planting have been found to have been broken; and if he will provide details in each instance. [64468]

Mr. Meacher: There were five instances in 1998 where, in the opinion of the Health and Safety Executive Inspector, the release of genetically modified organisms was not being carried out as specified in the consent document regarding the measures taken to restrict pollination of adjacent plants. In each case the consent was varied to include additional precautions to minimise any possible risk to the environment. In all cases the risks arising from pollination of adjacent plants by the genetically modified oilseed rape were assessed to be low.

Consent holder	*Consent reference*	*Trial site location*	*Additional precautions imposed*
Monsanto	96/R22/6	Rothwell, Lincolnshire	Destroy all oilseed rape seed harvested from plants within 50m of the GM trial plot, and extend post trial monitoring to include land within 50m of the GM trial.
Monsanto	96/R22/6	Stanton, Hereford and Worcester	Destroy all genetically modified glyphosate tolerant oilseed rape at this site prior to flowering.
Perryfields Holdings Ltd.	96/R27/1	Rothwell, Lincolnshire	Destroy all oilseed rape seed harvested from plants within 50m of the GM trial plot, and extend post trial monitoring to include land within 50m of the GM trial.
Pioneer Genetique	97/R24/2	Inkberrow, Worcestershire	Destroy all oilseed rape seed harvested from plants within 50m of the GM trial plot, and extend post trial monitoring to include land within 50m of the GM trial.
Plant Genetic Systems	97/R15/23	Inkberrow, Worcestershire	Destroy all oilseed rape seed harvested from plants within 50m of the GM trial plot, and extend post trial monitoring to include land within 50m of the GM trial.

British Rail Publications

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the publications issued by British Rail since 1 May 1997, indicating the total cost to British Rail of such publications. [64469]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I understand from the British Railways Board that, apart form the issue of site particulars by Rail Property Ltd., the only publication issued by the Board since 1 May 1997 is its Annual Report and Accounts 1996–97 published in January 1998. The cost of publication is a matter for the Board.

Packaging Waste

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will make an announcement on the outcome of the review of the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging Waste) Regulations 1997. [64443]

Mr. Meacher: I will be making an announcement shortly.

Driving Licences

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions with which countries his Department has arrangements in place for the exchange of driving licences for a British equivalent. [64439]

Ms Glenda Jackson: The countries are: Australia, Barbados, British Virgin Islands, Gibraltar, Hong Kong, Japan, Kenya, Malta, New Zealand, Republic of Cyprus, Singapore, Switzerland, Zimbabwe. It is also possible to exchange licences from countries in the European Economic Area (EU Member States plus Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein), but such licences are subject to mutual recognition and need not be exchanged.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he expects the holders of full Canadian driving licences will be able to exchange them for British equivalents; and if he will make a statement. [64440]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Recognition of Canadian licences is made complicated by the fact that the 12 Canadian Provinces are separate licensing authorities and the licences generally do not strictly conform to the UK requirements. Nevertheless legislation to allow holders of Canadian car driving licences to exchange them for the British equivalent is in hand. The aim is to have the necessary arrangement in place early in 1999.

Health and Safety Laboratory

Mr. Eric Clarke: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when the Health and Safety Laboratory intends to publish its Annual report and Accounts for 1997–98. [64492]

Mr. Meale: The Health and Safety Laboratory has today published the 1997–98 Annual Report and Accounts, and copies have been placed in the Library of the House.

Short-haired Bumblebee

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when his Department was informed of the likelihood that the short-haired bumblebee is extinct; which other creatures in the United Kingdom his Department has assessed to be at serious risk of extinction; and what action he proposes to take. [64333]

Mr. Meale: Surveys throughout the 1970s and 1980s suggested that whilst undergoing declines, the short-haired bumblebee was still present albeit localised. It was not until August 1998, when examples of the short haired bumblebee were not found for the second year in succession at its previous Dungeness stronghold, that fears were raised about its possible extinction.

There are a number of United Kingdom species which are endangered (fauna) or critically endangered (flora) and the Government are taking forward a range of measures, including the establishment of biodiversity species action plans, to address their plight. A plan for the short-haired bumblebee is in preparation.

A1

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will list the 24 hour traffic volumes at each interchange on the A1 route round Tyneside from the Metro Centre to North Gosforth including the New Tyne crossing *(a)* at the most recent available period and *(b)* three years earlier. [64437]

Ms Glenda Jackson: I have asked the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, Lawrie Haynes, to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Kerman to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 17 December 1998:

As you know the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions has asked Lawrie Haynes, the Chief Executive of the Highways Agency, to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question. You asked for traffic figures on the A1 route round Tyneside from the Metro Centre to North Gosforth, including the Tyne Crossing. I am replying on Lawrie Haynes' behalf in his absence from the office.

The attached table sets out the information available to us along the route you specify where we have counters, but these are not necessarily at the interchanges.

I trust the information meets your requirement.

Average daily and annual average daily traffic figures

Road	*Location*	*Grid*	*Ref*	*'AADT 1994*	*AADT 1995*	*AADT 1996*	*AADT 1997 (Percentage HGV)*	*Growth 1994 to 1997 (Percentage)*
A1	Northwest of Lobley Hill I/C	4237	5610	91,600	97,700	101,400	101,500(9)	10.8
A1	Northwest of Consett Route I/C	4232	5615	89,900	92,400	94,400	94,500(9)	5.1
A1	Metro Centre, East of I/C	4210	5623	77,500	79,800	80,600	80,800(10)	4.2
A1	Metro Centre, East of I/C, W/B	4210	5623	—	—	—	42,400(-)	
A1	Metro Centre, East of IC, E/B	4211	5624	—	—	—	38,500(-)	—
A1	Swalwell Slip Roads, N of Market Lane	4203	5623	—	—	—	8,800(-)	—
A1	Metro Centre, West of I/C, Slip On	4208	5624	—	—	—	4,300(-)	—
A1	Metro Centre, West of I/C, Slips On/Off	4208	5624	—	—	—	5,900(10)	—
A1	North of Blaydon Bridge	4194	5647	71,100	75,600	80,000	81,700(9)	14.9
A1	North of A69 Interchange	4199	5569	69,800	72,900	77,200	79,200(8)	13.5
A1	South of Ponteland Road Interchange	4211	5676	64,200	68,100	71,400	73,400(9)	14.3
A1	South of Brunton Lane Overbridge	4234	5706	48,600	52,800	55,000	57,000(8)	17.33
A1	North of Ponteland Road Interchange	4218	5687	53,300	57,800	60,000	61,200(-)	14.8

Road	ADT [2]Jan 98	ADT Feb 98	ADT Mar 98	ADT Apr 98	ADT May 98	ADT Jun 98	ADT Jul 98	ADT Aug 98	ADT Sep 98	ADT Oct 98	Average
A1	83,084	—	101,269	106,730	100,387	101,458	108,484	106,963	107,639	107,078	102,566
A1	85,615	91,805	94,303	93,473	93,736	—	98,574	98,749	97,959	97,917	94,681
A1	76,330	79,164	81,705	81,014	82,301	81,823	85,827	85,250	84,826	83,628	82,187
A1	37,963	40,926	42,363	41,663	—	42,351	44,443	44,815	44,486	44,285	42,588
A1	38,517	38,238	39,342	39,351	—	39,472	41,384	40,435	40,340	39,343	39,602
A1	8,170	8,338	8,635	8,674	7,820	7,902	8,413	8,171	7,388	8,129	8,164
A1	3,512	3,709	3,754	4,144	3,827	3,893	4,307	4,233	4,048	4,315	3,974
A1	5,018	5,031	5,122	5,560	5,208	5,380	5,796	5,736	5,498	5,903	5,425
A1	73,889	75,022	79,492	80,367	84,287	85,893	87,965	87,013	88,257	87,752	82,994
A1	71,638	74,996	80,097	80,051	82,555	84,185	86,841	86,070	86,187	81,277	81,391
A1	65,159	—	—	74,265	78,184	79,200	82,725	79,667	80,310	80,090	77,450
A1	52,015	56,109	58,023	57,250	60,754	60,940	62,874	62,457	61,629	60,977	59,303
A1	57,518	60,708	62,312	64,954	64,311	64,550	66,039	65,011	65,741	65,095	83,624

[1] AADT—Annual Average Daily Traffic
[2] ADT—Average Daily Traffic

Northern Development Area

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he intends to approve the revised master plan for the Northern Development Area, Newcastle, and its links to the strategic highway network before the outcome of the Tyneside multimodel transport study is made available. [64438]

Mr. Raynsford: The Master Plan for the Northern Development Area has been referred to the Secretary of State in support of an application for outline planning permission and they will be considered together to determine the extent to which there might be conflict with national planning policy. Since the Tyneside multimodel transport study is not expected to be available for another 12 to 18 months, it would not seem reasonable to delay consideration of the application and Master Plan.

Town Planning Laws

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to appoint a commission to examine town planning laws. [64434]

Mr. Raynsford: We have no plans to establish such a commission. Our policy statement, "Modernising Planning", published in January, set out a series of proposals for improving the responsiveness and efficiency of the planning system. During this year, we have announced new proposals for a stronger regional planning framework, improved arrangements for delivering development plans and better procedures for handling appeals. As part of this initiative, we will be putting forward further detailed suggestions for improving the planning system during 1999.

Steel and Aluminium

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what estimate he has made of the proportion of steel and aluminium which is recycled *(a)* in the UK and *(b)* in the rest of the EU. [64432]

Mr. Meale: According to the Recycling Advisory Unit, the percentage of scrap recycled as a percentage of production in the UK in 1997 was 55 per cent. for steel and 44 per cent. for aluminium. International comparisons are misleading because of the wide range of formulae used for calculating recovery and recycling rates.

Carbon Dioxide

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what progress the UK has made towards meeting its carbon dioxide reduction target agreed in Rio. [64433]

Mr. Meale: The UK is on track to exceed its commitment agreed in Rio, to return greenhouse gas emissions to 1990 levels by 2000.

Total emissions of greenhouse gases from the UK have fallen from 215 million tonnes carbon equivalent in 1990 to 204 million tonnes carbon equivalent in 1996, the latest year for which all figures are available. Emissions of carbon dioxide are available for 1997 and show a 7.8 per cent. reduction from 1990 levels.

Homelessness (Emergency Shelters)

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many places have been made available by his Department as emergency shelters for the homeless over the Christmas period in each of the last five years for which figures are available showing the locations of those places. [64309]

Mr. Raynsford: Through the Winter Shelter Programme additional bedspaces are provided for rough sleepers each year to ensure that no one needs to sleep rough on the streets during the winter months. The majority of the additional bedspaces are provided in London where rough sleeping is most acute. Information on the number of bedspaces is available for the following years:

1998–99: 547 bedspaces and 78 severe weather beds in London, Bristol, Brighton and Cambridge.

1997–98: 552 bedspaces and 59 severe weather beds in London, Bristol and Cambridge.

1996–97: 495 bedspaces and 100 severe weather beds in London and Bristol.

1995–96: 315 bedspaces in London.

1994–95: 330 bedspaces and 200 severe weather beds in London.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions how many places have been planned by his Department as emergency shelters for the homeless over the forthcoming Christmas period and in what locations. [64310]

Mr. Raynsford: Through the Winter Shelter Programme the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will be funding 547 additional bedspaces in London, Bristol, Brighton and Cambridge and a further 78 severe weather beds. The winter shelters will be open from 1 December to 31 March. The Winter Shelter Programme will also fund Crisis to keep up to 40 beds open for 2 weeks following the closure of their London Open Christmas provision on 30 December and help to fund a day centre in Portsmouth which will operate over the winter months. Information about the shelters is below:

Agency	*Shelter*	*Area*	*Bedspaces*
London			
English Churches Housing Group Ltd.	Bedford Place	Camden	60
Riverpoint	Talgarth Road	West London	24
Single Homeless Project	QE Nurses Home	Tower Hamlets	50
Providence Row Housing Association	Fitzgerald Lodge	Tower Hamlets	48
Crisis	Southwark Street	Southwark	40
London City YMCA	Errol Street	Islington	15
St. Mungo Community Housing Association Ltd.	Southampton Row	Camden	45
Salvation Army	Tudor Street	City	30
Look Ahead Housing and Care Ltd.	Marsham Street	Victoria	60
Look Ahead Housing and Care Ltd.	St. Pancras Way	S. Camden	42
Centrepoint	St. George's Court	S. Camden	60
Outside London			
English Churches Housing Group Ltd.	City Library	Cambridge	25
Cold Weather Group/English Churches Housing Group Ltd.	Stokes Croft	Bristol	29
Brighton Housing Trust	Lennox Street	Brighton	19

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what was the total expenditure for the provision of emergency Christmas shelters for the homeless over the past five years; and what estimate he has made of the resources to be made available for the purpose during Christmas. [64311]

Mr. Raynsford: The Government have made available £4 million this year for the Winter Shelter Programme. This will provide 547 additional bedspaces for rough sleepers and 78 severe weather beds in London, Bristol, Brighton and Cambridge. I will write with the additional information requested.

Personal Social Services (Worcestershire)

Mr. Luff: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what is the total cash value of the standard spending assessment for personal social services in Worcestershire including any special transitional grant funding in (i) 1998–99 and (ii) the proposed settlement for 1999–2000. [64406]

Ms Armstrong: In 1998/99, the standard spending assessment for personal social services in Worcestershire was £66.9 million. An additional amount of £3.2 million was also provided, amongst other special and specific grants, as a special transitional grant for community care clients. In 1999–2000, the standard spending assessment for personal social services is £70.7 million. An additional programme of specific and special grant funding will also be provided in 1999–2000.

Concessionary Fares Scheme

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on his plans for a national minimum concessionary fares scheme. [64482]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Our White Paper "A New Deal for Transport" outlined our proposed national minimum concessionary fares scheme, under which pensioners would be entitled to half fares on buses on the purchase of a £5 annual pass. Implementation will depend on the availability of parliamentary time for the passage of the necessary primary legislation.

Train Operating Companies (Punctuality)

Dr. Marek: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions, pursuant to his answer of 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *315–16*, on rail punctuality, if he will list the punctuality statistics based on the Passenger Charter and the same statistics calculated without disregarding void days for the 12 months up to 14 November. [64436]

Ms Glenda Jackson: Performance statistics appear in the Franchising Director's quarterly bulletins which are in the Library of the House. These reflect Passenger's Charter data which exclude voided days. Statistics which include the punctuality of services operated on voided days have not been collected on a systematic basis. However, as I said in my answer of 14 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *315*, numbers of void days will be included in the Franchising Director's next and subsequent quarterly bulletins.

SSSIs

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the protection of *(a)* sites and *(b)* areas of special scientific interest. [64300]

Mr. Meacher: We have issued a consultation paper in England and Wales called "SSSIs—Better Protection and Management". The consultation ends on 21 December.

Colleagues in Northern Ireland are preparing a consultation paper on Areas of Special Scientific Interest which will be issued in 1999.

Wind Farms

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he will make a statement on the impact of wind farms on the local environment. [64343]

Mr. Raynsford: We have issued national guidance on wind energy development in PPG22, and further guidance appears in PPG7, and also in the Report we issued recently "Planning for Sustainable Development—Towards Better Practice". The impact on the local environment is one of the relevant factors taken into account when considering planning applications for wind farms. Where wind farms are likely to have a significant effect on the environment, a formal Environmental Impact Assessment is required.

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for fast-tracking planning permission for wind farms under the general permitted development orders. [64340]

Mr. Raynsford: I am satisfied that the existing arrangements are appropriate.

Regional Development and Rural Policy

Mr. Peter Bradley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he proposes to consult on the administrative guidance promised to regional development agencies on sustainable development and rural policy. [64741]

Mr. Caborn: We have recently consulted on draft statutory guidance for Regional Development Agencies on the development of their regional strategies. In that guidance we have stressed that RDAs should take an integrated and sustainable approach to tackling economic issues across their regions, taking account of the particular features of their rural areas.

The guidance notes on sustainable development and rural policy that are being issued in draft today are intended to assist the RDAs on these matters. Copies are being sent to those national and regional organisations which have expressed an interest in these areas, and are also available on request from the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions. I am placing copies in the House Library.

The drafts build on informal soundings taken both within and outside Government and will form part of a package of guidance to be available to the RDAs early in the new year.

Local Government Finance

Ms Dari Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions when he will issue the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy Determination for 1999–2000. [64782]

Ms Armstrong: I have decided to confirm the proposals for the Determination on which we consulted authorities on 29 October 1998. My Department will be sending copies of the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy Determination 1999–2000, the Item 8 Credit and Item 8 Debit (General) Determination 1999–2000 and the General Determination of Administration of Housing Revenue Account Subsidy 1998 to all local housing authorities in England. Copies of the Determinations will be placed in the Library of the House next week.

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what resources he will make available to authorities that have been reorganised on 1 April 1997 and 1998 for reorganisation costs incurred by them in 1999–2000; and if he will make a statement. [64787]

Ms Armstrong: On 9 October I invited authorities which were eligible to participate in the Local Government Reorganisation Cost Scheme for 1999–2000 which reorganised before 1 April 1998, to submit estimates of the amount of expenditure they expect to incur on transitional costs of reorganisation in 1999–2000. On the basis, inter alia, of the information provided by the authorities, I have decided the maximum amounts that it would be appropriate to allocate towards such costs.

The amounts are as follows:

Maximum amounts: £000 rounded

Authority	*1999–2000*
1997 Reorganisations	
Luton Borough Council	200
Derby City Council	920
Bournemouth Borough Council	1,075
Darlington Borough Council	1,102
Portsmouth City Council	1,307
Southampton City Council	2,541
Rutland Council	1,400
Stoke-on-Trent City Council	1,300
Swindon Borough Council	349
Total	10,194
1998 Reorganisations	
West Berkshire Council	500
Reading Borough Council	4,131
Slough Borough Council	4,555
Wokingham District Council	1,587
County of Hertfordshire District Council	6,545
Worcestershire County Council	1,250
Plymouth City Council	3,442
Torbay Borough Council	3,782
Thurrock Borough Council	2,423
Nottingham County Council	1,465
Halton Borough Council	3,587
Telford & Wrekin District Council	699
Medway Borough Council	4,178
Peterborough City Council	902
Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council	1,900
Blackpool Borough Council	975
Total	41,921
Combined total allocations	52,115

Rent Increases

Ms Moran: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if, following the consultation paper Limiting Fair Rent Increases, published in the summer, he intends to introduce measures to help tenants facing exceptionally high fair rent increases. [64788]

Ms Armstrong: Tenants have been facing exceptionally high fair rent increases, following recent court cases. We received more than 500 responses to the consultation paper we issued in the summer which proposed limiting fair rent increases by applying a formula linked to the Retail Prices Index (RPI). There was overwhelming support for this from individual tenants and tenants' organisations. They considered our proposed limits were too high, however, and we have responded to this.

We propose, therefore, to go ahead and introduce new limits by making an Order under Section 31 of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985.

Rent officers and rent assessment committees will continue to determine fair rents as they do now. Where applications for re-registration are made to the rent officer after the Order comes into effect, however, fair rent increases will be limited to RPI + 7.5 per cent. for the first re-registration (rather than RPI + 10 per cent. as originally proposed) and RPI + 5 per cent. for subsequent re-registrations. This will ease the anxiety faced now by thousands of tenants, many of whom are elderly or on fixed incomes. It will give them certainty that their rents cannot be increased by more than these limits.

If there is no existing fair rent registration for the property, these limits will not apply. Nor will they apply if the rent officer or rent assessment committee considers that repairs or improvements carried out by the landlord have changed the condition of the property or common parts so much that the new rent should be at least 15 per cent. more than the existing registered rent. I believe that, in these limited circumstances only, it is fair for landlords to charge the full fair rent increase.

The new limits will apply to private tenants and secure tenants of registered social landlords who have a fair rent registered under the Rent (Agriculture) Act 1976 or the Rent Act 1977. They will not apply to rent increases for assured or assured shorthold tenancies under the Housing Act 1988. We have no plans to change the legislative framework for these tenancies.

The Order will be laid immediately after the Parliamentary Recess and will come into force shortly afterwards. My Department will make a further announcement when the Order is laid. We will issue a leaflet for landlords and tenants explaining in detail when the limits apply and how rent officers and rent assessment committees will calculate them, and details will appear on our internet site.

Best Value

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has to allow the Audit Commission to fulfil its proposed role in relation to best value; and if he will make a statement. [64789]

Ms Armstrong: The Audit Commission has a key role to play in our agenda for modernising local government particularly in implementing our proposals for best value.

We are to give new audit and inspection powers to the Commission as part of our proposals for best value. The Local Government Bill, currently before Parliament, provides for this. The Commission will arrange for the annual audit of Local Performance Plans, and for the inspection of local authorities' activities in areas other than those which are the responsibility of the existing specialist Inspectorates such as OFSTED, SSI and HMIC. The Commission will, however, work closely with these Inspectorates, as they do now, to ensure that all the necessary skills are brought to bear in securing best value.

The Commission will also be given powers to recommend action by the Secretary of State where an authority fails to achieve best value.

To ensure that these new functions are fully co-ordinated with the work of the other Inspectorates, I confirm both our commitment to establish an Inspectorate Forum to discuss common inspection interests, and our intention to take a power in the Local Government Bill to enable arrangements to be made where necessary to ensure the smooth and efficient operation of the inspection process.

Our work on ensuring proper co-ordination between the Commission and other Inspectorates in relation to best value and local government will fulfil the principal recommendation of the Prior Options Study of the Financial Management and Policy Review (FMPR) of the Audit Commission, which I am publishing today. Copies of the Report have been placed in the House Library.

This study, concluding that the functions of the Commission are necessary and best carried out by that body, proposed a study linked with best value to put in place a framework of working arrangements to provide a means of resolving differences between the various audit and inspection bodies involved. Our proposals for the Forum and new power will ensure such arrangements are in place.

We will now also be proceeding with the second stage of the FMPR. This looks at the detailed organisation and procedures which will be best suited to the Commission as it continues its traditional audit functions and embraces its new roles within best value. To lead the Audit Commission through this period of significant change, my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister and the Secretaries of State for Health and for Wales, have today appointed Helena Shovelton as its new Chairman. It will be for her and her fellow Commissioners to ensure that the highest standards of professionalism and objectivity—for which the Commission has been known—are continued, not only in its traditional audit roles, but also in its new tasks in the best value framework.

MV Derbyshire

Mrs. Gilroy: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions if he has made his decision on the form and coverage of the reopened formal investigation into the loss of the MV 'Derbyshire'; and if he will make a statement. [64906]

Mr. Prescott: Having considered the comments submitted following my announcement of 12 March 1998, *Official Report*, columns *270–71*, that the Formal Investigation into the loss of the Derbyshire was to be reopened I have today ordered, under section 269 of the Merchant Shipping Act 1995, that the whole of the case shall be reheard by Her Majesty's High Court of Justice. The preparation and presentation of the case, the

identification of parties to the Investigation and the statement of questions are now matters for my right hon. and learned Friend the Attorney General. The conduct of the reopened Investigation will be a matter for the Judge appointed to undertake it.

I have also decided that my Department will support an application made to the Judge at his preliminary hearing that the reasonable costs of a single legal term to represent the interests of the relatives of those lost with the ship at the reopened Formal Investigation should be met from public funds.

I have further decided that my Department should make a contribution towards the legal costs of one team that may be incurred by the relatives in preparing for the preliminary hearing.

Disabled People (Parking Badges)

Mr. White: To ask the Secretary of State for the Environment, Transport and the Regions what plans he has for the European Commission's recommendation for a standard European parking badge for disabled people to be implemented in the UK; what is the proposed timing; and if conditions of use of the UK's existing Orange Badge will be affected. [64967]

Ms Glenda Jackson: We have decided that the EC's recommendation for a standard design of blue parking badge for disabled people will be implemented in the UK. In reaching our decision we consulted with our statutory advisers, the Disabled Persons Transport Advisory Committee (DPTAC).

The aim of this Recommendation is, of course, to have a standard design of blue parking badge to replace the parking cards or badges which are currently on issue in Member States, and to ensure that there is reciprocity across Member States in recognising the new badge. The EC's intention is to have these arrangements introduced by 1 January 2000.

The Recommendation does not affect the eligibility criteria applied by Member States, nor the parking privileges which the parking card affords disabled people in each Member State. These remain matters for national governments to determine. Parking badges will, therefore, retain their national status, but will be designed on the basis of the EC's model.

In this country, we plan to phase in the new blue badges as existing Orange Badges come up for renewal, or new applications are processed, over the 3 years from 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2002.

PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the President of the Council if she will list the official visits to Buckinghamshire which *(a)* she and *(b)* her predecessor have made since 2 May 1997. [64134]

Mrs. Beckett: None.

HOUSE OF COMMONS

Recycling

Mr. Brake: To ask the Chairman of the Administration Committee (1) which company is responsible for the recycling of waste paper from the Parliamentary Estate; [64554]

(2) how much money was raised from the sale of waste paper from the Parliamentary Estate in the last financial year; [64555]

(3) what tonnage of waste paper from the Parliamentary Estate was recycled in the last financial year. [64553]

Mrs. Roe: These are matters for the Serjeant at Arms; I have asked him to write to the hon. Member.

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Good Town Planning

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what action her Department has taken to promote good town planning in the cities of the third world. [64400]

Clare Short: We view good town planning practice as an essential component in the better management of cities. This is in line with the internationally agreed development goals contained in the Habitat Agenda which resulted from the Habitat II conference at Istanbul in 1996. The Department provides funding support to help the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements, Habitat, take forward this Agenda.

Direct support is also given to the global United Nations Urban Management Programme and Urban Indicators Programme. The Department works closely with countries which implement these approaches to improved urban environments and has supported programmes which include good town planning practice in India and China.

Trading Markets

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development what steps her Department is taking to increase the access of third world countries to the principal trading markets of the world; and if she will make a statement. [64524]

Clare Short: I will write to my hon. Friend.

TACIS Projects

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for International Development if she will increase UK Government activity in generating TACIS projects. [63110]

Mr. Foulkes: We do not wish to see an expansion of Tacis activity until its effectiveness is improved. Tacis has been widely criticised for its slow procedures and cumbersome bureaucracy. We are in dialogue with the European Commission to address these problems, including the new Tacis Regulation which will be agreed during 1999.

CABINET OFFICE

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62811]

Mr. Kilfoyle: For the purpose of this question this answer includes the Prime Minister's Office and the Cabinet Office. Details of all Cabinet Office task forces, review bodies and advisory groups have been placed in the Libraries of the House.

Civil Servants (Sickness)

Charlotte Atkins: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office what is the overall level of sickness absence in the Civil Service. [64908]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The average level of sickness absence in 1997 was unchanged from 1996 at 8.5 days per person (10.4 days per staff year). This is broadly in line with the level in the economy as a whole.

I have placed in the Libraries of the House copies of the report on Sickness Absence in the Civil Service during 1997, which contains a comprehensive analysis of the figures about the Civil Service. This report was prepared for my Department by BMI Health Services.

My Department is discussing with Departments and Agencies how they can achieve the targets of reducing sickness absence in the Civil Service by 20 per cent. by 2001 and 30 per cent. by 2003 which were set following the July 1998 report "Managing Attendance in the Public Sector". I shall receive regular reports on progress.

Civil Servants (Industrial Tribunal)

Mr. Prior: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office how many civil servants took cases to an industrial tribunal last year. [64303]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Figures on the number of civil servants who take cases to Employment Tribunal are not held centrally, and can be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Official Cars

Mr. Peter Bottomley: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will estimate for each month in the past five years the total miles covered by Ministers' official cars. [63656]

Mr. Kilfoyle: Responsibility for this matter has been delegated under the terms of the Framework Document to the Government Car and Despatch Agency. I have asked its Chief Executive, Mr. Nick Matheson, to write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Nick Matheson to Mr. Peter Bottomley, dated 17 December 1998:

The Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office has asked me in my capacity as the Chief Executive of the Agency responsible for the Government Car Service (GCS) to reply to your Parliamentary Question dated 10 December 1998 asking for a list by month of the estimated total mileage of ministerial car travelling on official business in the last five years.

The Government Car and Despatch Agency, of which GCS is a part, was formed on 1 April 1997 and information on mileage before then is not readily available and can only be obtained at disproportionate cost. However, I estimate the total mileage of ministerial cars provided by this Agency and travelling on official business since 1 April 1997 to be as follows:

1997 month	*Estimated mileage*	*1998 month*	*Estimated mileage*
April	27,810	January	71,910
May	143,820	February	129,440
June	139,030	March	143,820
July	143,820	April	104,270
August	71,910	May	143,280
September	69,510	June	139,030
October	115,060	July	143,820
November	139,030	August	71,910
December	107,860	September	69,510
		October	115,060
		November	139,030

The above estimates are based on total official use of GCS cars. In addition to their use by ministers, cars are used for other official purposes such as the movement of documents and for use by officials as directed by the ministerial private office.

Biotechnology

Mr. Hope: To ask the Minister for the Cabinet Office if he will make a statement on biotechnology and genetic modification, following the establishment of the ministerial group. [64629]

Dr. Jack Cunningham: The Government are initiating a thorough review of the framework for overseeing developments in biotechnology, focusing particularly on the range of committees that have been established to provide the Government with expert advice and to regulate in this area. The Government are already engaged in a public consultation on developments in the biosciences which is due to report in Spring 1999. The review of the framework for overseeing developments in biotechnology, to be carried out by officials, will take place on the same timescale.

The Government believe that the protection of human health must be the first priority in regulating biotechnology. The impact on the environment and on biodiversity must also be thoroughly assessed, and the ethical issues raised by biotechnology fully taken into account. At the same time, the Government believe that this technology has the potential to offer enormous opportunities for improving the competitiveness of the economy and the quality of life in terms of health, agriculture, food and environmental protection, and that regulation should facilitate technological development by not imposing unjustified burdens on the biotechnology industry.

The Government seek to have in place a system that provides sound advice and proportionate regulation and is at the same time as simple and transparent as possible; that has the flexibility to respond to the fast moving developments in the technology and to public concerns; and that commands the respect of users and the public.

The review will assess the current system in the light of these criteria. It will seek to address the following questions:

what gaps exist in coverage of biotechnology by the existing committees and how might these be remedied?

what overlaps exist and are they justified? If not, how might they be remedied?

could the current system be structured in a more simple way?

how could the system for providing advice to Government be made more transparent?

are ethical and other wider issues addressed fully and properly within the current system?

are stakeholders given the appropriate opportunities to make their views known? For example, would an environmental stakeholder forum be a valuable addition to the current framework?

is the framework flexible enough to cope with the rapid development of this technology which is likely in the future?

does the public have confidence in the system currently in place?

The views will be sought of the existing regulatory and advisory bodies themselves, and of outside bodies with an interest in this area. The Government would also welcome views from the public.

The Cabinet Office and the Office of Science and Technology will jointly co-ordinate the review. The Government will make an announcement on its outcome.

ATTORNEY-GENERAL

Prosecutions (Assent)

31. **Mr. Simon Hughes:** To ask the Attorney-General how often in each of the last five years the holder of his office gave his assent to prosecutions which needed it; and if he will list each of these occasions. [63017]

The Attorney-General: The records in my Department are maintained for case-tracking rather than statistical purposes. The information sought by the hon. Member could be obtained only by a manual trawl of all relevant files. That would involve disproportionate cost.

Fraud

36. **Mr. Woodward:** To ask the Attorney-General what are the current case loads of the Serious Fraud Office and of the Crown Prosecution Service in relation to serious or complex fraud. [63024]

The Attorney-General: The Serious Fraud Office currently has a caseload of 68 serious or complex fraud cases. In the year 1997–98, of 39 defendants whose cases were brought to trial, 37 were convicted and 2 acquitted. In the current year so far, 22 defendants have been brought to trial with 18 convictions and 4 acquittals. The Crown Prosecution Service does not keep records which show serious and complex fraud cases as a separate category. It is therefore not possible to provide comparable figures.

Crown Prosecution Service (East Sussex)

Mr. Waterson: To ask the Attorney-General what is the current strength of the Crown Prosecution Service in East Sussex. [63020]

The Attorney-General: On 30 November 1998, the East Sussex branch of the Crown Prosecution Service had the full time equivalent of 23 Crown Prosecutors and 35.6 caseworkers and administrators engaged in its work.

PRIME MINISTER

Council of Europe

Ann Keen: To ask the Prime Minister if he will announce the composition of the United Kingdom delegation for the January 1999 ordinary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. [64792]

The Prime Minister: The January 1999 ordinary session of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe will be opened in Strasbourg on 25 January. The delegation from the United Kingdom for the session will consist of 23 members of the Labour Party, nine from the Conservative Party and four members from the minority parties. The delegation will serve in place of the current delegation from the opening January 1999 ordinary session.

The appointments of representatives and substitutes have been made on the basis of nomination by the parties concerned.

The same delegation will be representing the United Kingdom Parliament at the Assembly of the Western European Union.

Representatives from the Government Benches will be:

The hon. Member for Birmingham, Hodge Hill (Mr. Davis), who will act as leader; the hon. Members for Tooting (Mr. Cox); for Leigh (Mr. Cunliffe); for Sunderland, North (Mr. Etherington); for Newport, West (Mr. Flynn); for Glasgow, Maryhill (Mrs. Fyfe); for Hull, North (Mr. McNamara); for Leicester, South (Mr. Marshall); for Knowsley, South (Mr. O'Hara); for Glasgow, Bailleston (Mr. Wray); Lord Kirkhill and Lord Ponsonby of Shulbrede.

Representatives from the Conservative Party will be:

The hon. Members for Bournemouth, East (Mr. Atkinson); for Chipping Barnet (Sir S. Chapman); for East Yorkshire (Mr. Townend) and the right hon. Member for Eddisbury (Sir A. Goodlad).

Representatives from the minority parties will be:

The hon. Member for Portsmouth, South (Mr. Hancock) and Lord Russell-Johnston.

The following substitutes have been appointed to act as necessary on behalf of the delegates.

From the Government Benches: the hon. Members for Keighley (Mrs. Cryer); for Wolverhampton, South-West (Ms Jones); for Bristol, North-West (Dr. Naysmith); for Dover (Mr. Prosser); for Stourbridge (Ms Shipley); for Calder Valley (Ms McCafferty); for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Miss Smith); for North-West Leicestershire (Mr. Taylor); for Finchley and Golders Green (Dr. Vis); Lord Grenfell and Lord Judd.

From the Conservative Party: the hon. Member for Romsey (Mr. Colvin); for Ludlow (Mr. Gill); for Spelthorne (Mr. Wilshire); Lord Lucas of Crudwell and Lord Northesk.

From the minority parties: the hon. Member for Isle of Wight (Dr. Brand) and the right hon. Member for Stratford (Mr. Taylor).

G7 Presidency

Ann Keen: To ask the Prime Minister what has been achieved by the G7/8 during the United Kingdom presidency this year. [64793]

The Prime Minister: During the United Kingdom's Presidency of the G7/8 this year, we have made progress on international action in a wide range of areas.

The successful G8 Summit in Birmingham in May marked a departure from tradition. Leaders were able to have a more businesslike and focused discussion in an informal atmosphere, and agreed a shorter, more action-oriented communiqué. The new format worked well and will be followed next year under the German Presidency.

One of the most challenging responsibilities was the turbulent world economy and the need to modernise international financial architecture. The Birmingham Summit endorsed G7 Finance Ministers' proposals on strengthening the global financial system. This was followed up by wider-ranging recommendations in statements issued by G7 leaders and by G7 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors on 30 October. This includes enhanced financing arrangements for dealing with financial market contagion: codes of good practice for greater transparency and openness in economic policy-making and in private sector financial institutions; better processes for monitoring and regulating global financial stability; and reforms to improve the effectiveness of the international financial institutions. We hope to see good progress in these areas by the IMF/World Bank meetings in April 1999.

The G8 has renewed, at Birmingham and since, its commitment to resisting protectionism and continuing trade liberalisation in the framework of the WTO.

At Birmingham, G8 leaders discussed national action plans which set out practical measures to promote employability. These were based on the seven principles agreed at the G8 conference on employability, growth and inclusion in February to generate new employment opportunities and tackle unemployment and exclusion.

Development was a key theme of our Presidency. At Birmingham, G8 members committed themselves to the internationally agreed targets for economic and social development. They recognised the importance of substantial levels of development assistance and undertook to work towards untying it wherever possible. They supported the WHO's roll-back malaria initiative, to which the UK has pledged £60 million, and which is now being actively implemented by Mrs. Brundtland, the new Director General.

The UK was keen to use our Presidency to press ahead with debt relief for the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC) initiative. The Birmingham Summit agreed that all eligible countries should be in the debt relief process by the year 2000, and should receive interim relief where necessary. The IMF/World Bank annual meetings in October took this forward by agreeing to extend the HIPC initiative to the end of 2000; to allow IMF post-conflict assistance programmes to count towards a country's track record under the HIPC initiative; to carry out a comprehensive review of the initiative as early as 1999; and to undertake further work on what the international financial institutions can do to help post-conflict countries. Following UK proposals, the World Bank has set up a trust fund to help meet the multilateral debt service obligations of Nicaragua and Honduras, and the Paris Club of official bilateral creditors has agreed a three-year moratorium for these countries.

Leaders set in train further G8 action against trans-national organised crime. They endorsed a 10-point plan to combat high-tech crime and agreed the need for further action against money laundering and financial crime, official corruption, trafficking in human beings and the illegal firearms trade. Since Birmingham, officials have taken this work forward and G8 Interior Ministers reviewed progress in a video conference on 15 December.

With the end of the century fast approaching, leaders recognised the challenge posed by the millennium bug. G8 officials have, since the Summit, co-ordinated G8 preparations and contingency planning, worked actively to raise global awareness, and started to identify vulnerable areas in which international organisations have a key role to play. The United Kingdom is contributing £10 million to the World Bank trust fund to help developing countries.

After agreement at Birmingham for urgent work to take forward the Kyoto Protocol on climate change, G8 members all negotiated constructively at the conference of the parties in Buenos Aires in November and secured agreement on a workplan to bring into effect the international mechanisms such as emissions trading. G8 Foreign Ministers in May endorsed an action programme to protect the world's forests. In April, G8 Environment Ministers agreed a package of measures to fight against environmental crime.

In May, G8 Foreign Ministers agreed to focus G8 efforts against terrorism on terrorist financing, improving co-ordination on hostage-taking, and export controls on explosives and other terrorist-related items. A conference of senior officials on 7–8 December agreed shared principles and points for further action to tackle terrorist support mechanisms.

G8 leaders and Foreign Ministers discussed international action in various regions, for example the Middle East and Kosovo. After Birmingham condemned India's nuclear tests, G8 Foreign Ministers met in June and established a senior officials task force of G8 and other countries to take forward the international response to the tests in India and Pakistan.

We are working closely with the German government on the hand over to their G7/8 Presidency on 1 January 1999 and are preparing for the next G8 Summit in Holn on 18–20 June 1999.

European Commission

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Prime Minister how many and what percentage of people working for the European Commission are British. [64401]

The Prime Minister: There are 1,172 Britons working as permanent officials of the European Commission. This equals 7 per cent. of the total work force.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Prime Minister what percentage of people in the higher European Commission Civil Service positions are British. [64402]

The Prime Minister: The percentage of permanent officials in the higher grades of the European Commission who are British is 9 per cent. This can be further broken down into the following grades: 'A' Grade (graduate administrators)—11 per cent., 'LA' Grade (linguistic)—10 per cent.; and 'B' Grade (executive officers)—6 per cent.

Fox Hunting

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Prime Minister what plans the Government have to *(a)* introduce legislation relating to fox hunting and *(b)* provide opportunities for legislation relating to fox hunting. [64483]

The Prime Minister: We have kept fully to our Manifesto commitment on this issue, which was to allow a free vote. Members made their views clear with a huge majority in favour of banning hunting. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary has met with my hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Mr. Foster) and others to look at ways of dealing with this issue.

The Government's priority is to ensure the successful passage of the full legislative programme which was set out in the Queen's Speech.

Correspondence

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Prime Minister if he will place in the Library his response to the letter of 25 November to him from Michael Stone, former head of the United Nations Multidisciplinary Observer Unit, Iraq. [62796]

The Prime Minister *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* A copy of the reply to Mr. Stone's letter will be placed in the House of Commons Library.

NORTHERN IRELAND

Sure Start

Mr. Donaldson: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland what plans she has to introduce the Sure Start programme in Northern Ireland. [64143]

Mr. McFall: Present expenditure plans do not include provision for the introduction of the Sure Start programme in Northern Ireland. However, the Government are already doing a great deal in Northern Ireland to develop improved support systems for families with young children and a consultation exercise early next year on the Northern Ireland Childcare Strategy will seek views from a wide range of interests about how programmes for families with young children might best be further developed here. It will then be for the Northern Ireland Assembly to decide on the way forward.

Partnership Areas

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list for district partnership areas in the last financial year *(a)* the spending on community businesses and *(b)* the percentage of the productive investment budget this represents. [64210]

Mr. Paul Murphy: The information requested is as follows:

Partnership	£
1. Antrim Borough Partnership	0
2. The Ards Partnership	77,810
3. Armagh City and District Partnership	0
4. Ballymena Partnership	26,028
5. Ballymoney District Partnership	25,725
6. Banbridge District Partnership	9,750
7. Belfast European Partnership Board	0
8. Carrickfergus Together	0
9. Castlereagh Partnership	0
10. Coleraine Borough Partnership	0
11. Cookstown District Partnership	0
12. Craigavon District Partnership	30,900
13. Derry District Partnership	0
14. Down District Partnership	92,226
15. Fermanagh Partnership	233,195
16. Larne Partnership	39,000
17. Limavady Partnership	0
18. Lisburn Partnership	0
19. Magherafelt Partnership	0
20. Moyle Partnership	27,249
21. Newry and Mourne	31,000
22. Newtownabbey Partnership	0
23. North Down Partnership	0
24. Omagh District Partnership	113,600
25. South Tyrone Partnership	0
26. Strabane District Partnership	285,000

In the first tranche of funding, the Productive Investment allocation was an *indicative* percentage of the total (£41 million). At 18 per cent., it represents approximately £7,380,000 over 3 years (this figure is approximate, taking into account Exchange Rate Fluctuations).The figures shown for District Partnerships in one year (£991,483) represents only 13.43 per cent. of the budget, but the budget is indicative only, and the figures only relate to one year.

Military Strategy

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland on what dates since April Ministers attended meetings at which the review of military strategy in Northern Ireland was an agenda item, indicating which of these meetings were attended by *(a)* the Chief Constable of the RUC and *(b)* the General Officer Commanding. [64211]

Mr. Ingram: Military strategy is considered at many of the frequent formal and ad hoc meetings and contacts the Secretary of State has with the Chief Constable and GOC. Naturally these in no way prejudice the operational independence of the Chief Constable, supported by the GOC.

Hospitals (Capital Expenditure)

Mr. Maginnis: To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland how much capital expenditure on what dates and for what purposes has been made at *(a)* the South Tyrone Hospital and *(b)* the Craigavon Area Hospital since April 1991. [64265]

Mr. McFall: Prior to April 1993 in the case of Craigavon Hospital, and April 1996 in the case of South Tyrone Hospital, the Southern Health and Social Services Board was responsible for capital expenditure in minor

works and equipment in its area where the cost was below £1 million. From these dates, the responsibility has been delegated to the Trusts for determining priorities for local investment, up to £0.5 million, out of their general capital provision. Details of individual items below the delegated limits are not available centrally.

In April 1993 an allocation of £1.25 million was made to the Southern Health and Social Services Board for replacement of the main theatres in the South Tyrone Hospital.

Craigavon Hospital currently has a major capital project which involves recladding of the exterior of the building. This project started in mid-1994 and is due to finish in 2002. The current estimate of the total cost of the project is £14.5 million.

Capital expenditure on the project in each financial year by the Craigavon Area Hospital Group Trust is as follows:

£ million

Financial year	*Amount*
1994–95	0.250
1995–96	0.877
1996–97	2.669
1997–98	2.970
1998–99	4.680
Total	11.446

DEFENCE

Nerve Gas Attacks (Japan)

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what assessment his Department has made of the clinical data on the long-term health effects on the victims of the nerve gas attacks on the Tokyo subway and Matsumato in 1994 and 1995; if his Department has reached any conclusions; and if he will make a statement. [63841]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief Executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 17 December 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the clinical assessment of the long-term health effects on the victims of the nerve gas attacks on the Tokyo subway and Matsumato in 1994 and 1995. Although the Ministry of Defence and the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector (CBD) of DERA at Porton Down are aware of both the incidents and the acute toxic effects of sarin experienced in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, we have not undertaken a clinical assessment of the potential long-term effects of these attacks.

However, staff at CBD understand that Japan has instigated a long term follow-up programme to monitor the individuals who were involved in these incidents and it is anticipated that results from this programme will be published in due course.

I hope that this is helpful.

Porton Down

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many papers in the Technical Memoranda series of technical papers produced by the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment, Porton Down, are currently unclassified; when the series of papers *(a)* started and *(b)* finished; and how many papers have so far been produced in the series. [63933]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency. I have asked the Chief executive to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from John Chisholm to Mr. Ken Livingstone, dated 17 December 1998:

I have been asked to reply to your question about the Technical Memorandum series of technical papers produced by the Chemical and Biological Defence Sector of the Defence evaluation and Research Agency at Porton Down. This series of internal technical reports started in September 1980 and finished in June 1994. It contains over 100 reports, of which 17 are unclassified.

I hope that this is helpful.

Iraq

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many flights have been made by the RAF in the air exclusion zones in North and South Iraq since this military operation commenced. [64295]

Mr. George Robertson: Since patrolling of the northern and southern Iraqi No-Fly-Zones began (in 1991 and 1992 respectively), the RAF have flown a total of some 15,500 sorties in the zones.

Defence Evaluation and Research Agency

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will place a list of the 49 unclassified papers in the DERA reports series in the Library, specifying the title of each paper and the date on which it was produced. [63932]

Mr. Spellar: I have arranged for a list of the titles and dates to be placed in the Library of the House. The Chief Executive of the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency regrets that unfortunately there was an error in his reply to my hon. Friend's previous question about these reports on 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *636*. There are, in fact, 44 not 49 unclassified reports in the series.

Information Technology

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will make a statement on the abandonment of the IT system being prepared by Data Sciences for the Defence Intelligence Staff, indicating the reasons for the abandonment; what is the breakdown of the costs incurred; for what reasons an off-the-shelf system was not ordered at the time of the original decision; and what estimates were made at that time of the costs of an off-the-shelf system. [63717]

Mr. Spellar: The IT system referred to was selected in July 1988 following a detailed requirements survey. No off-the-shelf system was available which could meet the requirement and the rigorous security standards which were necessary. The system was abandoned in November 1996 because delays in implementing the contract and rapid changes in IT technology meant that it no longer met either the developing business needs of the Department or current health and safety standards.

Many valuable lessons have been learned about the acquisition and development of such a demanding system and these align closely with the principles of the Smart Procurement Initiative.

As a result of these lessons, a follow-on-system has now been put into service at a fraction of the cost using up to date commercial-off-the-shelf technology and is successfully operating on a widespread basis.

A precise breakdown of the costs incurred is not easy to establish but was around £14 million for hardware with the remainder for software development. Some £2 million were recovered from the company concerned in liquidated damages.

Nuclear-powered Submarines

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if the United Kingdom and France have reciprocal rights for their nuclear-powered submarines to use docking facilities in *(a)* either country and *(b)* their overseas dependent territories. [63901]

Mr. Spellar: The UK and France do not have any reciprocal rights for their nuclear-powered submarines to use docking facilities in (a) either country and (b) their overseas dependent territories. We do, however, have berthing arrangements for nuclear-powered submarines with a number of countries, including France.

Chile

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the number of occasions upon which the Commander in Chief of the Chilean Army has visited the United Kingdom since 1990, the duration of each visit, and the officers of the British armed forces and officials of his Department's Defence Sales Organisation whom he met on each occasion. [64023]

Mr. George Robertson *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* As far as we are able to ascertain from available records, no official visit to the United Kingdom has been made by the Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean Army during the years in question. We are, however, aware that the then Commander-in-Chief of the Chilean Army, General Pinochet, made six private visits to the United Kingdom between 1990 and 1997. We can find no record of his meeting any Officers or officials of the Defence Export Services Organisations on these occasions.

Mr. Loughton: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the names of each Royal Navy vessel which has visited Chile in the last five years and the dates and duration of the visits; and what future visits to Chile by Royal Navy vessels are planned. [63409]

Mr. George Robertson *[pursuant to his reply, 14 December 1998, c. 331]:* I regret that one visit by HMS Northumberland was inadvertently omitted from the list provided and the dates for the visit of HMS Brazen in 1994 were wrong.

The correct information is as follows:

Year	*Vessel*	*Date*
1994	HMS Brazen	28 September to 20 November 1994
1996	HMS Northumberland	27 June to 29 June 1996

General Pinochet

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence if he will list the contacts which took place between his Department and the Embassy of Chile about the security of General Pinochet during his visit to Britain in the autumn. [64331]

Mr. George Robertson: My Department is not aware of any contacts with the Embassy of Chile concerning General Pinochet's security.

Scottish Infantry Battalions

Mrs. Ewing: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the (i) establishment and (ii) current strength of each of the regular Scottish infantry battalions; and if he will list each element of company strength or above currently serving in them. [62542]

Mr. Spellar *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* The establishment and current strength of each of the six regular Scottish Infantry Battalions, as at 1 November, is as listed. The strength figures for individual companies within these Battalions is dependent, at any one time, on the operational or training needs of the Battalion. The individual company figures are, therefore, a snapshot of strength on 10 December 1998. The Battalion strength figures include personnel who bear the Battation's cap badge but are posted away from it.

Battalion Figures

Battalion	*Establishment*	*Strength*	*Surplus/Deficit*
1 Royal Scots			
Officers	35	31	–4
Soldiers	582	394	–188
1 Royal Highland Fusiliers			
Officers	34	33	–1
Soldiers	626	487	–139
1 Kings Own Scottish Borderers			
Officers	31	32	+1
Soldiers	520	439	–81
1 Black Watch			
Officers	31	25	–6
Soldiers	523	440	–83
1 Highlanders			
Officers	32	33	+1
Soldiers	583	438	–145
1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders			
Officers	31	32	+1
Soldiers	558	518	–40
Total	3,586	2,902	–684

Company Figures

Unit	*Officer strength*	*Soldier strength*
1 Royal Scots		
HQ Coy	9	112
A Coy	6	92
B Coy	6	Manned by Gurkhas
C Coy	5	96
Recce Coy	4	71
1 Royal Highland Fusiliers		
HQ Coy	12	98
A Coy	4	84
B Coy	4	78
C Coy	4	81
Sp Coy	6	145

Company Figures

Unit	*Officer strength*	*Soldier strength*
1 Kings Own Scottish Borderers		
HQ Coy	12	115
A Coy	5	81
B Coy	5	81
C Coy	5	78
Sp Coy	5	112
1 Black Watch		
HQ Coy	9	117
A Coy	3	71
B Coy	4	83
C Coy	4	78
Sp Coy	4	90
1 Highlanders		
HQ Coy	12	122
A Coy	4	59
B Coy	3	48
C Coy	4	55
Sp Coy	7	137
1 Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders		
HQ Coy	12	177
A Coy	5	85
B Coy	5	81
C Coy	5	84
Sp Coy	5	77

Note:
The Company figures include only those serving with that particular company on 10 December 1998 and may include personnel from other units.

Gulf War Veterans

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence for what reasons Ministry of Defence Police forcibly entered the homes of Gulf War veterans at the beginning of December. [63911]

Mr. Spellar: This is a matter for the Chief Constable of the Ministry of Defence Police Agency. I have asked the Chief Constable to write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from W. E. E. Boreham to Mr. Llew Smith, dated 17 December 1998:

I am replying to your Question to the Secretary of State for Defence about Ministry of Defence Police entering the homes of Gulf War veterans, as this falls into my area of responsibility as Chief Constable/Chief Executive of the Ministry of Defence Police Agency.

Ministry of Defence Police did not forcibly enter the homes of Gulf War veterans. On Tuesday 1 December 1998 the Ministry of Defence Police executed search warrants at two private residences in connection with an investigation to determine the whereabouts of MOD documents, believed stolen from the MOD's Gulf Veteran's Medical Assessment Programme at St. Thomas' Hospital, London.

Landmines

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence in what ways British forces are currently involved in initiatives around the world to reduce the risk of injury from landmines. [64460]

Mr. Spellar: UK Armed Forces personnel currently provide technical expertise and management skills to support mine action programmes world-wide. The Mine Information and Technology Centre at Minley, established in November 1997, has become the focal point for non-governmental organisations and other Government Departments for information on demining operations and provides Mines Awareness training to both military and civilian personnel in the UK. UK military personnel are currently attached to The Mine Action Centre in Mostar, the Mine Information Centre in Kosovo, and the UN Mine Action Service in New York. British forces are involved in mine action activities in Bosnia and provide an Explosives Ordnance Disposal Response Team on the Falkland Islands. We are also planning to second a Colonel to The Geneva International Centre for Humanitarian Demining next year and are examining the possibility of providing personnel to support a further five UN sponsored mine programmes world-wide. My Department continues to explore areas, in conjunction with the FCO and DFID, where the UK Armed Forces' expertise can make a meaningful contribution to humanitarian demining activity.

Armed Forces Recruitment (Scotland)

Mr. Gorrie: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what plans he has to assist the regular and part-time forces and cadets in Scotland to recruit up to their full complement. [61082]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* I will write to the hon. Member and a copy of my letter will be placed in the Library of the House.

Polo Ponies

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence (1) what is the total cost to the British Army of polo ponies stabled at bases *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* overseas; and how many polo ponies are stabled at its bases in total; [63991]

(2) what proportion of the cost of the maintenance of polo ponies in British military bases *(a)* in the United Kingdom and *(b)* overseas is paid by individual polo players. [63992]

Mr. Spellar: My Department does not own any polo ponies, although ponies may be owned by individual service personnel and stabled at private saddle clubs within British Army bases in the United Kingdom and overseas. The cost of stabling these ponies is met by non-public funds and therefore at no cost to my Department. My Department does not hold details of the number of polo ponies stabled within British Army bases, and this information could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

REME (Chorley)

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what are the projected operating costs for 101 Battalion REME operating out of Queensferry in the first three financial years of operation. [63622]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* This information is not yet available. However, operating costs of the TA Centre at Queensferry are currently forecast to be, over a 25-year period, some 25% lower than the operating costs of the TA Centre at Chorley, where HQ 101 Battalion REME is currently the sole TA occupant. The transfer of HQ 101 Bn to Queensferry, to join other TA units there, will realise further cost savings since it will allow the closure of TAC

Chorley. The precise details have yet to be established, but this work will be undertaken in the New Year as part of my Department's usual financial planning process.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what is the estimated cost of proposed redundancies of civil servants arising from the transfer of 101 Battalion REME from Chorley Barracks to Queensferry. [63621]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* It is too early to say how many redundancies, if any, will be necessary as a result of the transfer of 101 Battalion REME from Chorley to Queensferry, and what the cost of these redundancies may be.

Mr. Hoyle: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence what proposals for the future of 101 Battalion REME at the Devonshire Road Barracks, Chorley were included in earlier drafts of his review of the Territorial Army. [63619]

Mr. Doug Henderson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Initial outline proposals, issued as a basis for the consultative process, proposed that the Headquarters 101 Battalion would remain in Chorley.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many official visits *(a)* he and *(b)* the ministers in his Department have made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997; and if he will list them. [64138]

Mr. Spellar: Ministers in this Department have made the following visits to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997.

Secretary of State for Defence

14 October 1997: RAF Strike Command, High Wycombe

16 June 1998: RAF Strike Command, High Wycombe

Minister of State for the Armed Forces

5 June 1997: RAF Strike Command, High Wycombe

26 September 1997: Services Sound and Vision Corporation, Gerrards Cross.

CR Gas

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for Defence how many times the armed forces have used CR tear gas since 1968; on what dates CR gas was used; for what reasons; and in what circumstances the armed forces have been authorised to use CR tear gas since 1968. [63842]

Mr. Spellar: We have no records of CR having been used operationally by the Armed Forces. I understand that a small amount, however, has been used for training purposes in the past, but details of when this took place are not readily available and could be provided only at disproportionate cost.

CR was authorised to be held in readiness for use in Northern Ireland in October 1973. Its possible use has also been authorised on a small number of occasions where the armed forces have responded to a request for assistance for law enforcement purposes from the civil power. CR is only authorised as a non-lethal self-defence option where the risk to the safety of military personnel is considered particularly high.

AGRICULTURE, FISHERIES AND FOOD

Antibiotic Growth Promoters

13. **Dr. Gibson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the use of antibiotic growth promoters in food. [62997]

Mr. Rooker: The Government are responding today to the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee's report on resistance to antibiotics and other antimicrobial agents. We support a phased withdrawal of antimicrobial growth promoters which may impair the efficacy of prescribed therapeutic antibiotics used in human medicine through the development of resistant strains of organisms.

Flood Defences

16. **Ms Keeble:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to improve flood defences and warnings. [63000]

Mr. Nick Brown: Local operating authorities, including the Environment Agency, are responsible for flood defence. The Agency is responsible for flood warning systems and has published an Action Plan for implementing the recommendations of the independent review of last Easter's flooding.

28. **Mr. Harvey:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what additional money he will make available for the protection of farm land against flood in North Devon. [63013]

Mr. Morley: It is the responsibility of local operating authorities (primarily the Environment Agency (EA) and local authorities) to identify the need for flood defence measures and to decide which projects should be promoted. Therefore the Government cannot direct authorities to protect farm land. However the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions has notified local authorities that the flood defence element of their Standard Spending Assessments for 1999–2000 will be 6.3 per cent. higher than actual expenditure (on EA levies, Internal Drainage Board special levies and own revenue expenditure) in 1998–99. This Department will shortly announce funding for the Environment Agency's core capital programme for 1999–2000 in the South West; in addition the South West will benefit from further funding for flood warning improvements being provided to the Agency on a national basis.

Pig Industry

17. **Mr. Thompson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he is pursuing with other European Agriculture Ministers to help the pig industry. [63001]

Mr. Nick Brown: I have held a number of constructive discussions with my counterparts in the EU; both in Agriculture Council and in bilateral meetings. Following those discussions, we have encouraged the EU Commission to use all the mechanisms it has available to help alleviate the particularly difficult market conditions faced by the EU pig industry.

19. **Mr. David Heath:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what recent discussions he has had with pig producers in the south west about the current state of pig farming. [63003]

Mr. Nick Brown: Ministers have had a number of constructive discussions in recent weeks with pig farmers in the South West and elsewhere in Britain. These have helped us understand the crisis situation facing pig farmers at the present time.

Milk (Derbyshire)

18. **Mr. Barnes:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what reports he has received concerning levels of dioxin in milk in Derbyshire; and if he will make a statement. [63002]

Mr. Rooker: Since 1991, samples of cows' milk have been taken from dairy farms in the Bolsover and Staveley areas for analysis for dioxins. The results are routinely published and show that the levels of dioxins in cows' milk from both areas are now similar to those found in other parts of the UK. For this reason, the Ministry has no plans to carry out further sampling.

Battery Hens

20. **Mr. Nigel Griffiths:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures he has taken to improve the welfare of battery hens. [63004]

Mr. Rooker: We initiated discussions on proposals for new and improved EU welfare standards for all laying hens during our Presidency. We will continue to work with our European partners to being these negotiations to a satisfactory conclusion.

Food Standards Agency

21. **Mr. Corbett:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what the timetable is for consultation on financing the proposed Food Standards Agency. [63005]

Mr. Nick Brown: The Government remain committed to setting up the Food Standards Agency following the proposals outlined in the White Paper, The Food Standards Agency: A Force for Change (CM 3830). Should additional Parliamentary time become available, we hope to make progress on the necessary legislation in the present Session. In the meantime, following discussion with colleagues today, I can announce that we shall publish the Food Standards Bill in draft for public consultation in January 1999. The draft Bill will be available for pre-legislative scrutiny by this House. At the same time, we intend to publish a document for consultation on the Government's proposals for financing the Agency.

Mr. Corbett: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) when he expects to publish the draft Bill to establish a food standards agency; and what period will be provided for pre-legislative scrutiny of it; [63548]

(2) what form the pre-legislative scrutiny of the draft Bill to establish a food standards agency will take. [63547]

Mr. Nick Brown *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The Government remain committed to setting up the Food Standards Agency following the proposals outlined in the White Paper, *The Food Standards Agency: A Force for Change* (CM 3830). Should additional Parliamentary time become available, we hope to make progress on the necessary legislation in the present Session. In the meantime, following discussion with colleagues today, I can announce that we shall publish the Food Standards Bill in draft for public consultation in January 1999. The draft Bill will be available for pre-legislative scrutiny by this House. At the same time, we intend to publish a document for consultation on the Government's proposals for financing the Agency.

Farmers (Competitiveness)

22. **Mr. Loughton:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps he will take to ensure British farmers can compete on even terms with farmers in countries that have lower food and animal welfare standards. [63006]

Mr. Rooker: I am working hard to create a level playing field for standards across the European Union. As a result of initiatives we took in our Presidency, the European Commission has been charged with producing a report by June 1999 considering the relationship between EU and third country farm animal welfare standards and making any necessary proposals.

Farm Incomes

23. **Mrs. Spelman:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the impact of the recent decline in farm incomes on the UK farming industry. [63007]

Mr. Rooker: My Department announced on 1 December that Total Income from Farming is forecast to be 33 per cent. lower in 1998 compared to 1997. The main reason for the fall in prices in 1998 has been the oversupply of commodity markets, although the strength of the "green pound" has also been a factor.

The Government are aware of the difficult times that some sectors of the farming industry are undergoing, and have responded by announcing an aid package worth £120 million, targeted to the sectors most affected.

For the future, Government and all those associated with food production in the UK need to work together towards a sustainable, competitive and profitable industry and an attractive and viable countryside. This means in particular securing reform of the Common Agricultural Policy.

Farming (Profitability)

24. **Dr. Julian Lewis:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what assessment he has made of the prospects for future profitability of farming in the United Kingdom over the next 10 years. [63008]

Mr. Rooker: It is difficult to predict the trend in farm incomes because of the many factors involved. I am kept informed by my officials on how specific market developments could impact on farm incomes.

Beef on the Bone

25. **Mr. Blunt:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food how many prosecutions have taken place with regard to the sale of beef on the bone to the final consumer. [63009]

Mr. Rooker: Local authorities are generally responsible for enforcing the Beef Bones Regulations 1997 and I am not aware that any prosecutions have been completed though at least three are in progress. I would expect prosecutions to be taken if other enforcement action fails. I understand that such action has included reminding traders that the retail sale of bone-in beef is not permitted, the issuing of warnings and the formal cautioning of traders who admit to retailing bone-in beef. Details of prosecutions brought to my Department's attention are included in the BSE Enforcement Bulletin which is published monthly by my Department. Copies of the Bulletin are available in the Libraries of the House.

Bovine Tuberculosis

26. **Mrs. Organ:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what measures have been taken to combat TB in cattle. [63010]

Mr. Rooker: I refer my hon. Friend to the reply given to my hon. Friend for Stroud (Mr. Drew) on 12 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *311*.

Meat and Bonemeal

27. **Mr. Dawson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what proposals he has to change the regulation of the disposal of meat and bonemeal. [63011]

Mr. Rooker: The Government have no plans to change the regulations which currently govern the disposal of meat and bonemeal.

Common Agricultural Policy

29. **Mr. Wilkinson:** To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will meet the Commission of the European Union to discuss the fraudulent misapplication of funds under the common agricultural policy. [63014]

Mr. Rooker: I have no plans to do so. The Government have made it clear that they strongly support and encourage measures to reduce fraud against the CAP budget and to improve the budget's financial management.

Turkeys

Mr. Jenkin: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the competitiveness of the United Kingdom turkey industry. [62999]

Mr. Rooker: In common with other agricultural sectors, the turkey industry is experiencing difficulties and having to compete with cheap imports from other EU member states, particularly on the catering market.

The standard turkey as a Christmas loss leader in UK supermarkets will mean that lower priced imports will be competing with UK production during the busy Christmas period. However, at least one major supermarket is sourcing from the UK only and traditional farm fresh turkeys will all be British.

Agriculture Council

Mr. Quinn: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food if he will make a statement on the outcome of the Agriculture Council held in Brussels on 14 and 15 December. [64558]

Mr. Nick Brown: I represented the United Kingdom at a meeting of the European Union Agriculture Council in Brussels on 14 and 15 December.

The Council agreed by qualified majority (Belgium, Spain and Portugal abstaining) a Commission proposal to ban the use of four antibiotics in animal feed as from 30 June 1999. I welcomed the proposal as an appropriate response to advice, including from our own specialist scientific committees, that the use of antimicrobial growth promoters which may impair the efficacy of antibiotics used in human medicines should be phased out. I also welcomed the Council's statement stressing the need for an overall science-based approach to the issue of antibiotic resistance and calling for the Commission to submit a further report on the question of third country compliance with equivalent rules.

The Council also agreed by qualified majority (Italy and the Netherlands opposing, Portugal abstaining) two regulations establishing new agrimonetary arrangements to apply following introduction of the Single Currency on 1 January 1999. I supported these measures which will greatly simplify the agrimonetary system whilst reducing its costs and making it easier to operate. I was particularly pleased to secure provision that the impact of the ending of the freeze on green rates on 1 January, which benefited our farmers more than any other member state's, will be subject to a gradual transition over 3 years.

The Council reached unanimous political agreement on a proposal to send food aid to Russia, targeted towards regions most in need. I particularly welcomed this important gesture of EU solidarity with the Russian people.

A discussion of the Commission's proposal for reform of the wine regime concluded with agreement that final decisions should be taken in the context of the Agenda 2000 CAP reforms in the early part of next year. The Commission debated a proposal to establish EU-wide rules governing organic livestock standards, agreeing guidelines for further negotiations.

A package of proposals concerning the marketing of seeds was adopted by qualified majority (Denmark voting against). Council resolution on an EU forestry strategy was agreed unanimously, as was a decision approving a national aid to certain Greek co-operatives. The Commission also adopted unanimously a further postponement of the implementation of the 1997 Decision on Specified Risk Materials and a short deferral of implementation of new intra-Community health rules on trade in cattle and pigs.

Over-30-months Scheme

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what progress has been made on destroying over-30-months Scheme tallow stocks since his answer of 13 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *88*. [64670]

Mr. Rooker: At the end of November 1998, stocks of OTMS tallow stood at 185,000 tonnes. Over 53,000 tonnes of tallow have been sold to renderers to burn as a fuel to power the rendering process. The Intervention Board have commissioned a leading firm of environmental engineers to report early in the new year on the opportunities for the large scale destruction of OTMS tallow in accordance with the requirements of Commission Regulation 716/96. The

Board's aim is to conclude early supply contracts which take full account of the need to protect human and environmental health and yield the best return for the taxpayer.

WTO Agriculture Agreement

Dr. Naysmith: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what are his principal objectives with regard to the forthcoming negotiations on the World Trade Organisation's Agreement on Agriculture; and if he will make a statement. [63492]

Mr. Rooker: World Trade Organisation negotiations on agriculture are due to start in January 2000. We expect them to cover the same broad framework as the last negotiations (in the Uruguay Round), focusing on further improvements in import access for agricultural products; further cuts in subsidised exports; and reductions in domestic support to agriculture. We want these negotiations to be part of a comprehensive, time-limited round of trade liberalisation negotiations.

The European Commission will participate in the negotiations on behalf of the EU. We will therefore work to ensure that UK interests are properly taken into account. The negotiations will be an important opportunity for further liberalisation of agricultural trade in line with the UK's objectives on reform of the CAP. These are to phase out productions support over a period in order to reduce substantially the costs of the CAP to consumers and taxpayers, to encourage the development of a viable and sustainable farming industry which is capable of competing without ongoing production support, and to conserve and enhance the rural environment and promote the rural economy through targeted measures.

Beef Ban

Mr. Green: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food when he expects to make an announcement on the lifting of the export ban on beef derivatives with particular reference to tallow and gelatine. [63344]

Mr. Rooker: Exports of tallow derived from bovine animals slaughtered in the UK for use in human food, animal feed, cosmetics and medical and pharmaceutical products may recommence when the European Commission has inspected the implementation in the UK of the controls laid down in Council Decision 98/256/EC and set a date for this, after consulting the Standing Veterinary Committee. We have invited the Commission to carry out the required inspection and hope they will do so soon.

There is at present no proposal from the European Commission to lift the prohibition on exports of gelatin derived from bovine animals slaughtered in the UK for use in human food, animal feed, cosmetics and medical and pharmaceutical products. But all UK producers are approved to export gelatin made from imported bovine raw materials for such uses.

Gelatin, tallow and other byproducts derived from bovine animals slaughtered in the UK can already be exported for uses other than in human food, animal feed, cosmetics and medical and pharmaceutical products.

Fisheries

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what assessment his Department has made of future stock levels of each species of quota fish for the next four years; [64161]

(2) what estimate his Department has made of indicative total allowable catches for *(a)* 2000, *(b)* 2001 and *(c)* 2002; and if he will make those estimates available to the industry. [64160]

Mr. Morley: Fisheries scientists from the Ministry's Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) annually join with other international experts to undertake assessments of commercial fish stocks under the auspices of the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES).

Neither CEFAS nor ICES provides a forecast of stock size or catches over the next few years. This is because the future stock size and catches are significantly affected by the large natural variation in the number of young fish born each year and the level of total allowance catches agreed each year by Fisheries Ministers.

ICES does however provide an assessment of the current size and state of the stocks, and of the effects on the stocks of different sizes of catches taken in 1999. It also provides an indication of the status of the stocks, in the medium term, if fishing rates are set at particular levels relative to current fishing. For the longer term, ICES estimates the average long term catches and stock sizes that can be expected with different fishing rates applied to the stocks.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has to ensure that the six and twelve mile fishing limits will be retained after the renegotiation of the Common Fisheries Policy in 2002. [64155]

Mr. Morley: The Government are committed to ensuring the retention of restrictions on access by foreign vessels within six and twelve mile fisheries limits. They will secure this by working with other Member States and European Commission.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (1) what discussion *(a)* he and *(b)* his Department's officials have had with producer organisation representatives on industry proposals for coastal state management-based reform of the Common Fisheries Policy; [64158]

(2) what assessment he has made of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation and the National Federation of Fishing Organisation's joint proposal to operate a system of coastal state management of the fishing industry. [64159]

Mr. Morley: The Government have welcomed the industry's joint position paper as a good basis for discussion. I and Ministry officials have discussed the paper with the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisations and Scottish Fishermen's Federation, including producer organisation representatives. The two Federations have also been discussing their ideas with their counterparts in other Member States and I shall be interested to see the outcome of these contacts.

Mr. Andrew George: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what plans he has for the

future *(a)* operation and *(b)* funding of the Sea Fisheries Committees. [64156]

Mr. Morley: Sea Fisheries Committees will continue to play an important role in regulating inshore fisheries in England and Wales out to 6 miles from baselines. Funding is the responsibility of their constituent local authorities.

Supermarkets

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what steps the Government are taking to encourage supermarkets to maintain diversity of supply. [63382]

Mr. Rooker *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Decisions on the sourcing of produce at retail level are matters for the commercial judgment of the various retail companies, and it is not the Government's role to interfere in such decisions. We do however work closely with interests throughout the food chain, including the supermarkets, to encourage transparency in the interests of producers and consumers alike.

Poultry

Mr. Baker: To ask the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food what is his policy in respect of routine visits to poultry farms to ensure minimum inspection requirements are met. [63376]

Mr. Morley *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* I attach a high priority to the registration and inspection of farms wishing to use special marketing terms under EC egg marketing legislation. MAFF's Egg Marketing Inspectorate set annual targets reflecting the number, size and importance of the premises to ensure compliance with the set criteria. The figures are published annually in the Inspectorate's annual Report. Next year they will do the same for poultry meat marketing terms.

The State Veterinary Service visits farms to check compliance with statutory requirements and to encourage high animal welfare standards. Some visits are undertaken on a random basis, but priority is always given to responding to indications of possible welfare problems (e.g. complaints, problems detected at slaughterhouses).

EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

Students

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many graduate students of (i) nuclear and (ii) elementary particle physics there were at UK universities in *(a)* 1980, *(b)* 1985, *(c)* 1990, *(d)* 1995 and *(e)* 1998. [63083]

Mr. Mudie: The data requested are not available centrally. The available data show the numbers of postgraduate physics students in total but do not separately identify nuclear or elementary particle physics. The figures for physics are as follows:

Postgraduate students in Physics—former Universities Funding Council (UFC) Universities in Great Britain

Academic year	*Full-time*	*Part-time*
1980–81	1,794	755
1985–86	1,850	538
1990–91	2,216	555
1995–96	2,545	1,351
1997–98	2,319	1,330

New Deal (Women)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what assessment he has made of the arrangements for encouraging women to take up subsidised work under the New Deal; [63716]

(2) what assessment he has made of the factors which make women more likely to be transferred to other benefits while on the New Deal than men; [63715]

(3) what steps he has taken to encourage more women to join the New Deal. [63714]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 16 December 1998]:* All young people who have been unemployed and claiming Jobseekers Allowance for six months or more, are eligible for New Deal whether they are men or women. During the Gateway all participants are equally encouraged to look for unsubsidised work or take up one of the New Deal options, including subsidised work or take up one of the New Deal options, including subsidised employment. The reasons for transfer to other benefits, including differences in transfer rates between men and women, are being examined as part of the New Deal evaluation.

The latest Government Statistical Service data for end of September show that of the 167,400 young people who start new Deal 43,700 (26 per cent.) were female.

Prisoners (University for Industry)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to promote the take up of the University for Industry courses amongst prisoner inmates. [64426]

Mr. Mudie: There are no definite plans yet to promote the University for Industry among prison inmates. However, distance learning opens up new opportunities to deliver education and training in prisons and the University for Industry may therefore be of potential benefit to prison inmates. Ministers have already met colleagues at the Home Office to consider the possibilities. Further discussions are planned between the University for Industry and the Prison Service.

Education Development Plans

Mr. Hayes: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will make a statement on the progress of the education development plans. [64170]

Ms Estelle Morris *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* Draft education development plans were due to be sent to the Department by 14 December for preliminary consideration. Final plans are to be submitted for approval by 28 February.

Class Sizes

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made

of the means by which the additional funding for the reduction of class sizes will be met by local education authorities and diocesan authorities. [63773]

Ms Estelle Morris: We are making sufficient resources available for the class size pledge to be delivered fully by local education authorities and schools. £560 million is available over the next three years and this will be paid in the form of 100 per cent. grant for capital and revenue funding for all the types of schools covered by local authority implementation plans.

New Deal (Shrewsbury and Atcham)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have started on the New Deal scheme in Shrewsbury and Atcham broken down by *(a)* employer, *(b)* full-time education/training, *(c)* voluntary sector, *(d)* environmental task force and *(e)* other. [64076]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The latest Government Statistical Service figures for clients in the Shropshire Unit of Delivery, which covers the Shrewsbury and Atcham area, shows that to the end of September 1998, 695 young people had started on New Deal. 196 have left the Gateway of which *(a)* 24 have gained subsidised jobs through the Employment option *(b)* 43 have entered Full-Time Education and Training *(c)* 5 on the Voluntary Sector option *(d)* 12 on the Environment Task Force and *(e)* 112 have gone to other destinations including 75 who have gained unsubsidised employment.

Further Education

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if students registered with the University for Industry on courses up to and including Level 3 will count as further education enrolments. [62550]

Mr. Mudie: The University for Industry will offer access to comprehensive information and to flexible skills-based programmes at all levels. Some learners using UfI materials may be enrolled at further education colleges or other institutions; others could be registered with other providers, or be learning individually in UfI learning centres, or at home. This will depend on the needs of the individual learner.

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many of the additional further education students planned for the year 2002 will be University for Industry enrolments. [62546]

Mr. Mudie: No such decision has yet been taken. That will reflect student choices.

Lone Parents

Mr. Woodward: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much money is being made available in the 12 months from 1 December for lone parents with children of school age receiving income support in Oxfordshire. [63648]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. Shaun Woodward, dated 1998:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your question concerning how much money is being made available in the 12 months from 1 December for lone parents with children of school age receiving income support in the Oxfordshire area. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

The New Deal for Lone Parents programme is aimed at those lone parents on Income Support whose children are of school age although it is also available to lone parents with younger children. A total of £2.34m for the programme has been allocated to the Employment Service London and South East Region, which includes Oxfordshire, for the period from December 1998 to March 1999. This figure includes all programme and running costs but does not include funding for in-work and lone parent benefits.

Unfortunately, separate figures for individual areas are not available. Funding allocations for 1999–2000 have not yet been agreed.

I am sorry that I cannot be more helpful.

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) if the training undertaken by the advisers for the New Deal for Lone Parents is accredited towards a national vocational qualification; [63994]

(2) what proportion of the advisers for the New Deal for Lone Parents have been recruited from *(a)* the Benefits Agency, *(b)* the Employment Service, *(c)* the Child Support Agency and *(d)* other backgrounds. [63995]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Responsibility for the subject of the question has been delegated to the Employment Service agency under its Chief Executive. I have asked him to arrange for a reply to be given.

Letter from Leigh Lewis to Mr. John Healey, dated 1998:

As the Employment Service is an Executive Agency, the Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your questions regarding whether the training undertaken by the advisers for the New Deal for Lone Parents is accredited towards a national vocational qualification and what proportion of the advisers for New Deal for Lone Parents have been recruited from (a) the Benefits Agency, (b) the Employment Service, (c) the Child Support Agency and (d) other backgrounds. This is something which falls within the responsibilities delegated to me as Chief Executive of the Agency.

Highly skilled personal advisers are a crucial element in the success of New Deal for Lone Parents. Personal advisers were recruited on the basis that they would receive extensive training to cover all aspects of their job and would work towards an NVQ level 3 in Guidance. A number of the training modules New Deal Lone Parent advisers complete will contribute to their work towards the NVQ level 3 in Guidance.

As of 30 October approximately 88% of Lone Parent advisers have been recruited from the Employment Service, 5% from the Benefits Agency and 7% from the Child Support Agency.

I hope this is helpful.

Child Care

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what plans his Department has to raise the standards of care and safety for over-eight year olds in child care provision; [64115]

(2) what plans he has to extend the regulations of child care to those providing care for the over-eights; [64116]

(3) what estimate his Department has made of the cost of registering those caring for children over eight years of age. [64118]

Ms Hodge: The consultation paper on the regulation of early education and day care, issued earlier this year by the Department of Health and the Department for Education and Employment, asked whether there should be regulation of day care for children over 8-years-old and, if so, in what form. The Government are considering the responses and will announce their intentions in due course, mindful of the need to ensure children in day care are suitably protected from harm. The cost of any extension to current arrangements will be considered along with all other factors.

Jackie Ballard: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what research his Department has commissioned on parents' views about *(a)* the quality of child care provision and *(b)* the system of registration of child carers. [64117]

Ms Hodge: We have commissioned a baseline survey of parents of children aged up to and including 14 years to establish nationally the demand for child care. This survey will ask parents about the overall quality of child care in the local area. Parents' opinions of the registration of child carers have not been surveyed, although a number of individuals responded to the Government's recent consultation paper on the regulation of early education and day care.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment by what means the National Child Care Strategy will be targeted, with particular reference to the City of Coventry. [63503]

Ms Hodge *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* To date, a total of £470 million has been committed to the National Child Care Strategy in England over five years. Planning and implementation of the Strategy in England is being taken forward at local level by the new Early Years Development and Child Care Partnerships which have been set up in each local authority area.

Key elements of funding are as follows:

In 1998–99, £12 million has been allocated to Partnerships to carry out local child care audits, consult on demand and draw up plans for the delivery of increased provision next year. This has been allocated on the basis of the number of 0–14 year olds in each Partnership area. The City of Coventry allocation for this work is £81,000. Over the same period, some £22.1 million has been made available to fund the Out of School Child Care Initiative (OSCI), of which £378,000 has been allocated to Coventry and Warwickshire through the local Training and Enterprise Council. In addition, Coventry Local Education Authority has received £87,000 this year through Nursery Education Grant.

For 1999–2000, my Department has allocated £44 million to the Partnerships for child care activities, which includes £6.7 million to safeguard existing good quality services in disadvantaged areas, which are at risk of closure. These funds have again been allocated on the basis of the number of 0–14 year olds in each area, adjusted to take account of the levels of deprivation in each area as reflected by the proportion of children receiving free school meals. For 1999–2000, the City of Coventry Partnership has been allocated a total of £309,700. Nursery Education Grant will again be available to support additional places for 4 year olds, and we shall be announcing support for 3 year olds shortly. Next year's Revenue Support Grant allocation also includes substantial funds to support additional registration and inspection of child care services and the requirement to set up a local Children's Information Service in each Partnership area. A further £7 million is also being made available to TECs next year for training for child care workers: £776,500 of this has been allocated to the West Midlands, but a breakdown at local level is not yet available.

Coventry's education Standard Spending Assessment (SSA) represents an increase of £6.1 million, or 4.1 per cent. over the comparable figure for 1998–99. Part of this may be used to support the National Child Care Strategy.

In addition there is a range of other potential sources of funding which Early Years Development and Child Care Partnerships, local authorities, individuals and other groups can bid for to support National Child Care Strategy objectives. This includes the New Opportunities Fund, which will allocate some £220 million across the UK by 2003 to create new out of school child care places, the Single Regeneration Budget and the European Social Fund.

Teachers' Remuneration

Mr. Mitchell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what consultation he undertook and representations he received prior to the publication of his Green Paper on the future remuneration of teachers. [64119]

Ms Estelle Morris: No formal consultation was undertaken prior to the publication of the Green Paper although a wide range of representations were received from interested bodies during the course of normal business.

A full consultation on the Green Paper has now commenced and will continue until 31 March 1999. A copy of the Green Paper and summaries have been provided to each school to assist with this process.

Teachers (Performance-related Pay)

Mr. Cohen: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to review the payment of annual salary increments to teachers in the context of his performance-related pay proposals; and if he will make a statement. [63612]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer my hon. Friend to the statement my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State made to the House on 3 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 1041–44, about the Government's consultation on the reform of the teaching profession. In that statement I indicated that we proposed two pay ranges for classroom teachers, separated by a new performance threshold. Up to the threshold, we would expect teachers normally to progress through annual salary increments, as now. To cross the threshold, we would expect teachers to demonstrate high and sustained levels of achievement and commitment. Further steps on the higher pay scale would be based on appraisal of performance.

Grant-maintained Schools

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) how many grant-maintained schools have had their annual maintenance grant for *(a)* 1992–93, *(b)* 1993–94, *(c)* 1994–95 and *(d)* 1995–96 redetermined by reason of retrospective adjustments to their rateable assessments; [63461]

(2) which grant-maintained schools have been required to repay in full overpayment of annual maintenance grant identified following retrospective adjustments to their rateable assessments; and in which of these cases recovery of the money has been phased; [63462]

(3) which grant-maintained schools have not been required to repay the full overpayment of annual maintenance grant identified following retrospective adjustments to their rateable assessments; and what percentage of the overpayment has been required in each case; [63463]

(4) what was the total annual maintenance grant overpaid to grant-maintained schools in respect of each of the years 1992–93 to 1995–96. [63464]

Ms Estelle Morris: These matters are the responsibility of the Funding Agency for Schools. I have asked the Chairman of the Funding Agency to arrange for a reply to be sent to the hon. Member.

New Deal (Unsubsidised Jobs)

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will estimate how many of those leaving the New Deal for unsubsidised jobs remain in those jobs for more than *(a)* one month, *(b)* two months and *(c)* three months. [61078]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 30 November 1998]:* The New Deal statistics are revised each month to remove from the cumulative unsubsidised jobs count any participant who has remained in a job less than 13 weeks.

The length of time those moving into unsubsidised jobs have remained (a) in those jobs and (b) in employment, will be assessed as part of the evaluation of the New Deal.

New Deal Gateway

Mr. Field: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many claimants who have been eligible for the New Deal entered the gateway and then ceased drawing benefit when leaving the gateway after being offered a choice of options and did not go onto draw other benefits or go into education. [62301]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Disaggregation according to whether they have been offered New Deal options is not presently available. This will be examined in the New Deal evaluation.

Mr. Keetch: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the monthly expenditure on *(a)* Gateway provision and *(b)* other provision for the New Deal for young people by region from January to the end of September. [63276]

Mr. Andrew Smith *[pursuant to his reply, 15 December 1998, c. 478]:* I am providing a revised response as the figures in my earlier reply had been corrupted during data transmission and were therefore incorrect.

The correct position is that expenditure brought to account by the Employment service since national roll-out of New Deal is £4.36 million for Gateway and £42.79 million for other provision. Separate regional figures are not available for the Pathfinder districts between January and March 1998 as all expenditure was accounted for centrally during that period. The figures for April to September 1998 are shown in the following table.

Region	*April*	*May*	*June*	*July*	*August*	*September*	*Total*
Northern							
(a)	25	15,927	39,556	166,209	362,232	15,302	599,251
(b)	226,252	321,994	473,310	550,260	746,309	1,237,069	3,555,194
Yorks and the Humber							
(a)	230	6,339	46,321	92,932	114,086	191,245	451,153
(b)	400,218	751,298	1,291,763	1,291,895	1,706,588	1,500,211	6,941,973
East Midlands							
(a)	154	7,202	18,317	36,916	59,360	50,291	172,240
(b)	308,991	308,776	453,548	502,366	902,391	993,871	3,469,943
London and South East							
(a)	39	16,851	300,898	179,170	331,267	471,237	1,299,462
(b)	964,053	1,016,204	1,445,047	1,000,767	2,411,676	2,666,225	9,503,972
South West							
(a)	104	7,576	27,570	56,277	47,028	47,245	185,800
(b)	366,834	421,769	588,880	541,934	722,097	1,282,248	3,923,762
Wales							
(a)	20	2,921	11,593	77,960	112,375	93,223	298,092
(b)	286,553	293,690	499,811	475,279	563,873	766,913	2,886,119
West Midlands							
(a)	6	8,526	29,972	29,490	71,324	112,581	251,899
(b)	306,247	342,233	548,321	441,711	630,879	800,955	3,070,346
North West							
(a)	24	13,185	56,507	224,563	238,678	198,129	731,086
(b)	553,467	577,490	862,998	877,928	1,283,154	1,462,770	5,617,807

Region	April	May	June	July	August	September	Total
Scotland							
(a)	30,090	2,052	55,083	71,018	103,926	106,104	368,273
(b)	436,351	453,354	613,039	595,726	779,322	944,482	3,822,274
Total							
(a)	30,692	80,579	585,817	934,535	1,440,276	1,285,357	4,357,256
(b)	3,848,966	4,486,808	6,776,717	6,277,866	9,746,289	11,654,744	42,791,390
Total	3,879,658	4,567,387	7,362,534	7,212,401	11,186,565	12,940,101	47,148,646

(a) Gateway provision
(b) Other provision
Source:
Employment Service Financial Accounting System April to September 1998

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Willis: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how much of the additional expenditure for education announced in the July Comprehensive Spending Review for England has already been allocated to *(a)* local authority expenditure, *(b)* class size reduction, *(c)* school buildings and repairs, *(d)* standards fund grants, *(e)* early years education, *(f)* further education, *(g)* higher education and *(h)* other spending by his Department; and how much has been allocated to no specific purposes as yet. [63326]

Mr. Blunkett: *(a)* The additional provision for local authority Education Standard Spending over the three years 1999–2000 to 2001–02 is £6,831 million.

(b) The additional provision for class size reduction over the three years is £320 million. This is in addition to £300 million previously committed to the programme.

(c) The additional resources for school buildings and repairs form the Comprehensive Spending Review is some £1.5 billion over the three years[1]. This is in addition to the extra £1.1 billion of capital investment we are making available through the New Deal for Schools. Taken with existing provision this means that there will be a £5.4 billion investment programme in school buildings over the period.

(d) The Standards Fund programme will be over £900 million in 1999–2000. This includes the DfEE grant and the local education authority contribution.

(e) There will be £390 million extra over the three years for early education places for 3 year olds, together with an element of the £452 million for the Sure Start programme.

(f) There will be additional funding for further education of £725 million over the two years 1999–2000 to 2000–01[2].

(g) There will be additional funding for higher education of £776 million over the two years 1999–2000 to 2000–01[3].

Further details on Departmental spending programmes will be published in the Departmental Report in the Spring.

[1] Includes some capital funding for class size reductions and resources for the National Grid for Learning which will go through the standards fund

[2] Figure includes £95 million in increased employer contributions

[3] Figure includes £308 million fee contributions

Secondary School Pupils

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment, pursuant to his answer of 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *85*, on secondary school pupils, if he will list the six maintained schools in England with more than 2,000 pupils in January. [64192]

Ms Estelle Morris: The information requested, taken from The 1998 Secondary School Performance Tables is as follows:

Maintained secondary schools with more than 2,000 pupils as at January 1998

Crown Woods School, Greenwich
Great Barr GM School, Birmingham
Outwood Grange School, Wakefield
Wolfreton School, Hull
Exmouth Community College, Devon
Collingwood College, Surrey.

Education Expenditure

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of GNP was spent on *(a)* education and *(b)* secondary schools in (i) Germany, (ii) France, (iii) the Netherlands, (iv) Sweden, (v) Switzerland, (vi) the US and (vii) the UK in each year since 1968. [62085]

Mr. Mudie: Information on expenditure on all levels of education as a percentage of GDP has, for the countries mentioned, been collected by the OECD for the period 1970 to 1995 (the latest year for which such collated data are available). Information about secondary school expenditure has not been collected by the OECD separately from other forms of educational expenditure.

This information on all educational expenditure is given in the table. Any comparisons should be cautious, since the expenditure definitions used are not always fully comparable, (particularly in their treatment of research and development expenditure) and definitions, as indicated in the table, have sometimes changed over time. In addition, the special OECD definitions mean that the OECD figures for the UK may differ from those published in "Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses".

Public expenditure on education as a proportion of GDP fell between 1994–95 and 1997–98. However, as a result of the investment in education announced in the Comprehensive Spending Review, expenditure on education as a proportion of GDP will rise from 4.6 per cent. in 1998–99 to 5.0 per cent. in 2001–02.

Public expenditure on education as a percentage of GDP, 1970–1995

Year	France	Germany	Netherlands	Sweden	Switzerland	United Kingdom	United States
1970	n/a	3.7	7.5	7.9	3.9	6.2	6.0
1971	n/a	4.2	7.5	8.0	4.3	6.3	6.0
1972	n/a	4.4	7.4	7.9	4.5	6.5	5.7
1973	n/a	4.5	7.3	7.6	4.7	6.3	5.5
1974	5.5	4.9	7.1	7.3	4.9	6.9	5.5
1975	5.6	5.1	7.4	7.1	5.3	6.8	5.7
1976	5.5	4.9	7.2	7.2	5.5	6.4	5.6
1977	5.4	4.7	7.1	7.7	5.5	6.0	5.3
1978	5.3	4.6	7.1	8.0	5.4	5.8	5.0
1979	5.2	4.6	7.0	8.6	5.3	5.7	4.9
1980	5.1	4.8	7.1	8.5	5.2	5.7	4.9
1981	5.5	4.8	7.2	8.0	5.1	5.6	4.8
1982	5.6	4.7	7.2	7.8	5.2	5.5	4.9
1983	5.7	4.8	7.0	7.4	5.3	5.2	4.8
1984	5.7	4.6	6.6	7.2	5.2	5.2	4.6
1985	5.7	4.6	6.6	7.0	5.1	4.9	4.6
1986	5.7	4.5	6.7	7.0	5.2	4.9	4.8
1987	5.6	4.4	6.9	6.9	5.2	4.8	4.8
1988	5.5	4.3	6.1	6.5	5.0	4.8	4.9
1989	5.1	4.2	5.7	5.4	n/a	4.8	5.0
1990	5.1	4.1	5.7	5.6	5.2	4.9	5.2
1991	5.4	4.1	5.6	6.5	5.4	5.3	5.5
1992	5.5	4.1	5.6	7.7	5.7	5.2	5.4
1993	5.7	4.8	5.4	7.7	5.8	5.1	5.2
1994	5.9	4.7	5.2	7.7	5.7	5.2	4.9
1995	6.0	4.8	5.2	7.7	5.6	5.2	5.0

Notes:
Horizontal lines indicate a break in the series
n/a—data not available
Source:
Data supplied to OECD by individual countries for the "Education at a Glance" series.

Numeracy Hour

Mr. Sawford: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he expects the numeracy hour to be introduced in schools; and if he will ensure that teaching materials arrive in sufficient time for staff to be trained and organise resources. [62348]

Ms Estelle Morris: Dedicated daily mathematics lessons of up to an hour are expected to be introduced in primary schools from September 1999. Suitable materials will be provided in the early part of next year.

Key Stage 2 National Curriculum Tests

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what percentage of schools have had an above average percentage of pupils scoring below the national average at Key Stage 2, level 4 in *(a)* reading, *(b)* writing and *(c)* numeracy; and how many of these schools are in education action zones; [63312]

(2) what percentage of schools had an above average percentage of pupils scoring below the national average at Key Stage 2, level 4 in *(a)* reading, *(b)* writing and *(c)* numeracy; and how many of these schools are in education action zones. [63980]

Ms Estelle Morris: The table shows the number and percentage of maintained mainstream schools where the proportion of pupils achieving level 4 in the Key Stage 2 National Curriculum tests is below the overall national proportion reaching that level. Data are shown for the English and mathematics tests, together with the reading and writing components of the English test. The proportion of these schools in the first tranche of education action zones is also shown.

The National Curriculum standards have been designed so that most pupils will move up one level every two years. Level 4 is the level expected for most 11 year olds.

	Percentage of pupils achieving level 4 or above in England	Schools whose performance is below the national result		Schools with performance below national result in education action zones	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage [1]
English	65	6,520	44	230	4
Reading	71	6,150	42	220	4
Writing	53	7,180	49	230	3
Mathematics	59	6,770	46	230	3

[1] As a percentage of the number of schools below the national result

Competitive Bidding

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many bids were *(a)* received and *(b)* successful in each local education authority area for each competitive bidding process launched by his Department since May 1997. [63979]

Ms Estelle Morris: I refer the hon. Member to the reply given on 18 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *644-45*.

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the total value in each local education authority of the bids which were *(a)* received and *(b)* successful for each competitive bidding process launched by his Department since May 1997. [64184]

Ms Estelle Morris: This question could only be answered at disproportionate cost.

GCSEs

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of schools had a smaller percentage of pupils gaining *(a)* five GCSEs at grades A* to C and *(b)* five GCSEs at grades A to G, in 1998 than in 1994; and how many of those schools are in education action zones. [63982]

Ms Estelle Morris: The GCSE information requested is shown in the table:

GCSE information	
Total Schools	3,840
Number of schools with a smaller percentage of pupils achieving 5+A*-C GCSE grades in 1998 than in 1994	976
Percentage	25.4
Number of those schools in Education Action Zones	16
Total Schools	3,840
Number of schools with a smaller percentage of pupils achieving 5+A*-G GCSE grades in 1998 than in 1994	946
Percentage	24.6
Number of those schools in Education Action Zones	9

Free Milk

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if the Government will re-introduce free milk at school for children in deprived communities. [64430]

Mr. Charles Clarke: The law requires those Local Education Authorities and grant-maintained schools that provide milk to make this available, without charge, to pupils whose parents receive income support or income based job-seekers allowance. The Government have no plans to extend this eligibility or to make the serving of free milk compulsory.

Physical Education

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what assessment he has made of the provision of physical education in *(a)* state and *(b)* private schools. [64427]

Ms Estelle Morris: OFSTED inspections report on individual schools' provision of National Curriculum subjects including physical education. At a national level, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Schools reports annually to my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on compliance with the National Curriculum requirements, including physical education, in state schools. The provision of physical education in private schools is the responsibility of individual headteachers and governing bodies of such schools.

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment (1) what estimate he has made of the number of hours spent by children doing PE *(a)* in inner city schools and *(b)* in suburban schools; [64428]

(2) how many hours per week *(a)* primary and *(b)* secondary school children (i) spend currently and (ii) spent in each of the last 10 years doing PE. [64429]

Ms Estelle Morris: There is no prescribed statutory minimum or maximum time which schools should devote to PE. The National Curriculum for PE consists of six areas of activity and schools have a degree of freedom in deciding which physical activities to teach and how much time should be allocated to them and to other National Curriculum subjects. PE must be taught to all children throughout their compulsory schooling.

Evidence from OFSTED inspections of the number of hours per week primary and secondary schools currently spend teaching PE is given in the table.

Key Stage	*Average hours of PE per week (approx.)*
1 (ages 5–7)	1 hour 20 minutes
2 (ages 7–11)	1 hour 35 minutes
3 (ages 11–14)	2 hours
4 (ages 14–16)	1 hour 15 minutes

These figures do not account for travelling and changing time incurred in the provision of swimming tuition. In addition, the amount of time devoted to PE at Key Stage 4 is reduced when pupils study for public examinations.

My Department also carried out a survey of PE and sport in English schools in January 1996. It found that primary schools had on average 1.5 to 2 hours per week of National Curriculum PE. The amount of time devoted to PE in secondary schools varied between 1.5 and just over 2 hours per week according to year group. No information is held prior to that time or divided by the location of schools.

Unemployment

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has to develop the Employment Service's job search provision for unemployed people following the evaluation report on programme centres published last month. [64905]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I am pleased with the progress in developing programme centres so far. To provide further support for job search, where this is delivered through Jobclubs, I have asked the Employment Service to

encourage providers to operate a more flexible model of delivery to enable jobseekers to receive help tailored to their individual needs.

In addition I have asked the Employment Service to introduce changes to Jobclub eligibility conditions. This means that, in line with programme centres, job search support will be available for people experiencing difficulty in returning to work after 13 weeks of unemployment. This will be at the discretion of Employment Service advisers who will identify those clients who most need this kind of help.

The changes will take effect from April 1999.

Post-16 Provision

Mr. Watts: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment when he will publish a report on the comparative public funding costs of post-16 provision. [64904]

Mr. Mudie: The Report on the Public Funding costs for Education and Training for 16–19 year olds in England 1996–97 will be published today. I have arranged for a copy to be placed in the Library.

International Labour Conference

Mrs. McKenna: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what plans he has for publishing the White Paper on the instruments adopted at the 85 session of the International Labour Conference. [64969]

Mr. Andrew Smith: I have today published a White Paper entitled "International Labour Conference", copies of which have been placed in the Library.

New Deal

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment how many people have entered the New Deal gateway in the *(a)* Fareham, *(b)* Gosport and *(c)* Test Valley Borough Council areas since its inception; and how many took up each New Deal option. [64221]

Mr. Andrew Smith: The information on New Deal is only held by Unit of Delivery and is not broken down below this level. I refer the hon. Member to the reply given on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 82.

Mr. Stunell: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the energy efficiency schemes being delivered under the New Deal for Young People. [64226]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Details of energy efficiency schemes are not held centrally and could be obtained only at disproportionate cost.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Brady: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment if he will list the *(a)* average, *(b)* longest and *(c)* shortest time taken by each LEA in England and Wales to produce statements of special educational need in 1997–98. [64246]

Mr. Charles Clarke: This information is not collected centrally.

New Deal (Public Sector)

Mr. Rowlands: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what percentage of New Deal jobs have been provided to date by the public sector. [61483]

Mr. Andrew Smith: Between 5 and 6 per cent. of young people who have started New Deal jobs are employed in the public administration and education sector as defined in the Standard Industrial Classifications. In addition, there are an increasing number of New Deal job starts in Health and other community, social and personal services, which will include public sector job starts.

Tuition Fees

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Education and Employment what forecast he has made of the amounts to be raised from the introduction of tuition fees over the planning period; and how much of that amount will be used for university funding. [64431]

Mr. Mudie: The higher education funding plans assume that institutions in England will receive private income from home and EU students starting full-time undergraduate courses from 1998–99 as follows: £130 million in 1998–99; an extra £105 million in 1999–2000; and compared with 1998–99 an extra £203 million in 2000–01. Over this period the higher education sector will retain all the income from student contributions to fees and receive extra public funding on top. Figures for 2001–02 will be announced later.

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

School Sport

Mr. Michael J. Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport what representations he has received concerning the teaching of sport in schools. [63441]

Mr. Banks: Since 1 May 1997, I have received about 80 letters about sport in schools and the physical education National Curriculum. These have come from professional organisations such as the CCPR and BAALPE, University lecturers, head teachers and members of the public. Almost all of these have been about the importance of the teaching of physical education and sport in schools and support my view that physical education and sport is an essential part of youth development. While fully supporting the current emphasis on numeracy and literacy, I know how important sport and PE are; not only as subjects in their own right, but as having a positive impact on cognitive development and on classroom and academic performance. That is why I am delighted that sport and PE still have to be taught in primary schools, while allowing flexibility by relaxing the detailed programmes of study. We are working closely with the Department for Education and Employment to ensure that PE and sport remain an important part of the curriculum.

There are of course a number of initiatives underway to promote sport in schools, many of which are co-ordinated by the English Sports Council (ESC) under its National Junior Sports Programme (NJSP). This is a major programme which provides a framework within which schools, local authorities, governing bodies of

sport, sports clubs and youth organisations can work together to provide quality sporting opportunities for 4 to 18-year-olds in a planned and co-ordinated way. It is intended to reinforce and build on good practice, to support teachers and to provide an important profile for the work they are doing. ESC initiatives include the Sportsmark award scheme, the Sporting Ambassadors scheme, the development of an Activity award for primary schools and proposals for Community Sports Co-ordinators.

Publications

Mr. Pike: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how he plans to take forward policy on the legal deposit of publications following the report of the working group chaired by Sir Anthony Kenny. [64743]

Mr. Chris Smith: I am arranging for the working group's report to be placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament and published on both my Department's web site and that of the British Library.

The report recommends that there should be a single national published archive of non-print material. It proposes that a code of practice for voluntary deposit of electronic publications should be drawn up, but suggests that, in the longer term, only statutory deposit can secure a comprehensive national published archive.

The report proposes that the following should be deposited with the national published archive:

CD-roms to be deposited in a single copy only after 12 UK sales. The group has put forward alternative options for access:

accessibility on a stand alone basis at a single site (the preference of the publishers); or

dissemination among the legal deposit libraries using a secure ring fenced network (the preference of the libraries).

Microforms to be deposited in a single copy only after six UK sales.

For British films, a mint print to be deposited, plus a negative or equivalent after three years; for other films released in the UK, a best copy; for British videos, a mint condition duplicate; for other videos, a new condition reference copy.

For sound recordings, two copies to be deposited.

It concludes that it would not be feasible to include on-line publications and databases, although it suggests that provision be made to bring them into a statutory system in the future, subject to full consideration and consultation in each case.

For print publications, the report recommends that while the six existing legal deposit libraries be retained, in the light of the increasing move towards devolution and regional Government, more work should be done to reduce the number of copies claimed by the libraries, especially in the area of local magazines and periodicals. I regard this as important.

On the issue of improved access to deposited material in Northern Ireland, the report suggests that if an acceptable way can be found to allow secure networking of deposited electronic material, an access point in Northern Ireland could be included in a secure network.

Because the Government believe it is important to plug the growing gap in the national published archive, I have asked Sir Anthony Kenny to draw up, through a group of technical experts from the legal deposit libraries and publishers, detailed guidelines for a voluntary code of practice. I have asked Sir Anthony to examine the scope for this to include a basis for the secure ring-fenced networking of CD-roms between the deposit libraries in a way that will satisfy the publishers that there would be no undue risk for licence holders.

However, I agree with the report's conclusion that a voluntary code will not be viable in the longer term and I believe the report makes a convincing case for moving towards legislation for the legal deposit of non-print publications on the basis of minimum burden on publishers and minimum loss of sales. It will be necessary to do further work on definitions and the impact on business and I have asked Sir Anthony Kenny to take this forward through the medium of the technical group of library and publishing experts. Once that is done, we shall move towards legislation.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many official visits *(a)* he and *(b)* the Ministers in his Department, have made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997; and if he will list them. [64130]

Mr. Chris Smith: I have made no official visits to Buckinghamshire within that period. My hon. Friend the Minister for Sport visited Milton Keynes on 29 May 1998.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport how many people in his Department are currently on secondment from private companies; and if he will list them, their companies and their current responsibilities within Government. [62820]

Mr. Chris Smith: There are currently no staff on secondment from private companies within my Department. However, Bob Cotton will join DCMS on secondment from Gardner Merchant in January as my adviser on the Tourism industry.

English Sports Council

Mrs. Golding: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport when he expects to announce the appointment of the English Sports Council. [63265]

Mr. Banks: We advertised the posts of Chair and new Members of the English Sports Council in the summer. We received a large number of applications and we will anncunce the names of those who are to be appointed as soon as we have finished the selection process.

St. Kilda

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport on what date he intends to reply to the letters sent to him by Greenpeace on 15 July, 1 September and 30 October asking him to take action to protect St. Kilda World Heritage Site from the threat of offshore oil development. [64290]

Mr. Battle: I have been asked to reply.

I have replied to the Greenpeace letters.

SCOTLAND

Departmental Groups

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62808]

Mr. Dewar *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* A list of task forces, review panels and advisory groups follows. My Department does not hold centrally the information requested for these bodies and it could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Task Forces

Action Group on Standards in Scottish Schools
Best Value Task Force
Borders Working Party
Coronary Heart Disease Task Force
Council Tax Collection Working Group
Higher Still Implementation Group
Higher Still Liaison Group
Inter Agency Forum on Female Offenders in Scotland
New Deal Advisory Task Force For Scotland
Prestwick Task Force
Protection Order Task Force
Working Group on Tenant Participation

Review Panels

Air Quality Forum
HIV Health Promotion Strategy Review Group
Land Reform Policy Group
Learning Disability Review
National Review of Health Resource Allocation
Postgraduate Review Committee
Review of Housing Statistical Returns Group
Review of Public Health Legislation Steering Group
Review of Rural Water and Sewerage Grant Scheme
Review of SSSIs in Scotland
Review of the Public Health Function in Scotland
Review of the Scottish Roads Programme
Review of Transport Policy in Scotland
Scottish Bathing Water Review Panel

Advisory Groups

5–14 Committee
Acute Services Group
Advisory Committee on Statistical Information
Commission on Local Government and the Scottish Parliament
Committee on Post School Education and Training of Young People with Special Needs
Consultative Panel on the Registration of Nursing Homes and Independent Hospitals
Empty Homes Initiative Advisory Group
Expert Panel on Sex Offending
Languages Action Group
Liaison Group on Road Accident Statistics
Mental Health Reference Group
National Co-ordinating Committee for the Staff Development of Teachers
National Dental Advisory Committee
National Goose Forum
National Grid for Learning Scottish Steering Committee
National Nursing Midwifery and Health Visiting Advisory Committee
National Paramedical Advisory Committee
National Pharmaceutical Advisory Committee
National Transport Forum For Scotland
New Housing Partnerships Advisory Group
NHS Waiting List Support Force
Objective 5B: Rural Diversification Forum: Project Assessment Committees (four)
Planning Group on Teacher Supply
Rehabilitation Technology Services Advisory Group
Rough Sleepers Initiative Advisory Group
Rural Agenda Steering Group
Scottish Biodiversity Group
Scottish Breast Screening National Advisory Group
Scottish Cervical Screening National Advisory Group
Scottish Childcare Board
Scottish Criminal Statistics Committee
Scottish Exports Forum
Scottish Guidance Group
Scottish Household Survey Advisory Group
Scottish Medical and Scientific Advisory Committee
Scottish Millennium Forum
Scottish National Blood Transfusion Service Users Group
Scottish National Rural Partnership
Scottish Partnership on Domestic Violence
Scottish School Leavers Survey Project Advisory Group
Scottish Social Inclusion Network
Scottish Statistical Liaison Committee
Scottish University for Industry Advisory Group
Scottish Virtual Teachers Centre Advisory Group
Secretary of State's Advisory Committee on Scotland's Travelling People
Secretary of State's Advisory Group on Sustainable Development
Secretary of State's Advisory Panel of Economic Consultants
SMART (Small Firms Merit Awards for Research and Technology): Scotland Judging Panel
SME (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) Initiative Operational Programme for Lowland Scotland: Advisory Group
SME (Small and Medium Sized Enterprises) Initiative Operational Programme for Lowland Scotland: Programme Management Committee
Social Work Statistics Liaison Group
Working Group on Council Tax Collection

Rehabilitation Beds (Availability)

Mr. Moore: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how many step-down beds were available in each health board area in Scotland in each year since 1990–91. [63683]

Mr. Galbraith: There is no national classification of a step-down bed. Information on numbers of rehabilitation medicine beds in the seven years to 31 March 1997 is shown in Table 1. A more detailed bed classification system was introduced in 1997–98, and information on numbers of rehabilitation, convalescent and geriatric orthopaedic rehabilitation beds for the year ending 31 March 1998 is shown in Table 2.

Table 1—NHS in Scotland—beds[1] in specialty of rehabilitation medicine[2] by health board area of treatment: years ending 31 March 1991 to 1997

	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Argyll and Clyde	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ayrshire and Arran	—	—	—	17	21	20	20
Borders	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Dumfries and Galloway	—	—	—	—	5	8	4
Fife	—	—	—	—	—	1	—
Forth Valley	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Grampian	—	—	—	8	16	16	16
Greater Glasgow	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Highland	1	3	2	3	3	63	70
Lanarkshire	22	—	—	—	—	—	—
Lothian	62	62	65	65	71	83	76
Orkney	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Shetland	—	—	—	—	—	—	4
Tayside	27	10	1	—	—	—	—
Western Isles	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Scotland	111	75	69	93	115	190	190

[1] Average available staffed beds. The figures shown are averages rounded to the nearest whole number. Totals may not always equate to the sum of individual Health Board figures.
[2] Differing methods of bed classification may exist between areas. For example, beds classified as rehabilitation medicine in one area may be classified under other specialties in another area. Comparisons should therefore be made with caution.

Table 2: NHS in Scotland—rehabilitation, geriatric orthopaedic rehabilitation and convalescent beds[1] by health board area of treatment: year ending 31 March 1998[2]

	All selected beds	Rehabilitation beds[3]	Geriatric orthopaedic rehabilitation beds[4]	Convalescent beds[5]
Argyll and Clyde	7	—	7	—
Ayrshire and Arran	21	21	—	—
Borders	—	—	—	—
Dumfries and Galloway	24	—	24	—
Fife	60	40	20	—
Forth Valley	—	—	—	—
Grampian	129	42	16	71
Greater Glasgow	168	144	24	—
Highland	75	74	—	—
Lanarkshire	36	24	12	—
Lothian	199	109	89	—
Orkney	—	—	—	—
Shetland	8	8	—	—
Tayside	28	28	—	—
Western Isles	—	—	—	—
Scotland	754	490	191	71

[1] Average available staffed beds. The figures shown are averages rounded to the nearest whole number. Totals may not always equate to the sum of individual Health Board figures.
[2] Differing methods of bed classification may exist between areas. For example, bed classified as rehabilitation beds in one area may be classified under other specialties in another area. Comparisons should therefore be made with caution.
[3] Beds in specialty of Rehabilitation Medicine or in facilities designated as rehabilitation wards.
[4] Beds in facilities designated as geriatric orthopaedic rehabilitation units.
[5] Beds in facilities designated as convalescent units.

Local Government Finance

Mr. David Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland when he expects to make an announcement about the Local government Finance Settlement for Scotland for 1999–2000. [64781]

Mr. Dewar: I expect to make my announcement shortly. Following the usual consultation with the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities over the proposals for the distribution of Aggregate External Finance (AEF), I intend to lay the necessary Local Government Finance (Scotland) Order in early February 1999 for approval by this House. I will ensure that the details of my proposals, which will be issued as a Circular to all Scottish local authorities, will be made available in the House Library at the same time as my announcement.

Tay River Protection Order

Mr. McAllion: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what conclusions he has reached on the Tay River Protection Order; and if he will make a statement. [64791]

Mr. Macdonald: On 5 June the Government announced in the Edinburgh Gazette its intention to revoke the Tay Protection Order made under the Freshwater and Salmon Fisheries (Scotland) Act 1976 and invited comments. This followed concerns that access for public angling had been withdrawn in a number of areas.

Seven hundred and seventy-four responses were received. 766 supported retention of the Order. Eight advocated revocation. A full report on the operation of the Order has since been submitted on behalf of the new Protection Order Liaison Committee. A copy of that report, which has been endorsed by 18 groups associated with angling and riparian ownership in the area, will be placed in the Library.

My noble Friend Lord Sewel, the Minister with responsibility for Fisheries in Scotland, has considered the comments received and the contents of the report very carefully. He has noted with satisfaction that as a result of the efforts of the Committee the access lost has been reinstated and furthermore that 86 per cent. of the river and loch are now open to public access compared with the 81 per cent. promised at the time the Order was originally approved. My noble Friend also welcomes the steps announced to ensure the effectiveness of the future operation and monitoring of the Order.

In the light of the remedial action taken to improve and guarantee public access to angling and the generally enhanced arrangements for its operation, my noble Friend has decided that the Order should be retained. However, close monitoring will continue.

BBC News

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what representations he has received about the BBC's Six o'clock News in Scotland; what response he has made; and if he will make a statement. [64455]

Mr. Galbraith: To date my right hon. Friend has received two letters about the BBC's decision on the Six O'Clock News. The replies will make clear that the decision taken about the news programmes was one for the Governors of the BBC to make. They will also say that we welcome the promise of additional financial resources and new jobs in Scotland, which will lead to an increase in programmes produced in Scotland.

Heroin

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps he plans to take to limit increases in the abuse of heroin. [64315]

Mr. Galbraith: The Government have already taken a number of measures to enhance our response to drug misuse, including heroin.

In October my hon. Friend the Minister for Home Affairs and Devolution and I announced an additional £5 million package of measures between now and March 2000. This included £2 million backing for new initiatives to cut drug crime, such as drug treatment and testing orders and more intensive probation; a £2 million boost to NHS drug treatment funding; a multi-agency blitz to reclaim communities in the grip of drug dealers; and the establishment of a new national drug prevention team to work with Drug Action Teams. Specifically on heroin, we have made £300,000 available to the Health Education Board for Scotland for new work to combat the threat to young people from cheap heroin.

In addition, we expect to issue an enhanced drug strategy framework for Scotland in the first part of 1999 and this will take account of the current concerns about increased heroin misuse.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will provide additional resources to fund a public awareness campaign on the dangers of heroin abuse. [64316]

Mr. Galbraith: Additional resources of £300,000 have already been made available to the Health Education Board for Scotland for new work to combat the threat to young people from heroin. That work is now at an advanced stage and a decision will be taken shortly on how and when it can be taken forward.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what steps he is taking to reduce the incidence of heroin abuse in the Lothian and Borders Police Board Area. [64312]

Mr. McLeish: The Government's strategy for tackling drug misuse in Scotland focuses on the key areas of education, treatment and enforcement. Police operations like Operation Foil carried out recently by Lothian and Borders Police against heroin use are a vital contribution to the Government's overall drugs strategy.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what assessment he has made of the level of resources available to the police in the Lothian and Borders Police Board area to combat heroin abuse. [64317]

Mr. McLeish: The level of resources deployed by the Lothian and Borders Police on drugs issues is an operational matter for the Chief Constable within the funding level set by the Police Board. During the period 1996–97 to 1998–99 Lothian and Borders Police GAE funding has increased by 9.2 per cent. This has enabled the Force to sustain high profile operations such as the recent highly successful Operation Foil directed against heroin use.

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland what guidance has been made available to the courts on a consistent sentencing strategy for heroin users and dealers. [64313]

Mr. McLeish: It is not a function of my right hon. Friend to give guidance to the courts on sentencing. The Appeal Court gives guidance to other courts through its appeal decisions, and in disposing of appeals it has the power under Section 118 of the Criminal Procedure (Scotland) Act 1995 to pronounce an opinion on the sentence which is appropriate in any similar case. The courts can and do make use of a wide range of penalties provided for drugs offenders, depending on the varying circumstances of each case. Heroin is a Class A drug in terms of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 and as such its possession and supply are subject to tough maximum penalties, including life imprisonment in the case of supply. In the case of drug traffickers there is a mandatory *minimum* sentence of seven years on conviction of a third offence.

Homeless People (Emergency Shelters)

Mr. Kirkwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland (1) how many places have been made available by his Department as emergency shelters for the homeless over the Christmas period in each of the last five years for which figures are available, showing the locations of those places; [64306]

(2) how many places have been planned by his Department as emergency shelters for the homeless over the forthcoming Christmas period and in what locations; [64307]

(3) what was the total expenditure for the provision of emergency Christmas shelters for the homeless over the past five years in Scotland; and what estimate he has made of the resources to be made available for the purpose during Christmas. [64308]

Mr. Macdonald: The statutory responsibility for dealing with homelessness in any area and for deciding whether any emergency shelters are required over the Christmas period or at other times of year rests with the relevant local authorities. The Scottish Office provides them with financial support that can be used for such purposes.

The Rough Sleepers Initiative was established by The Scottish Office to provide financial assistance to local authorities to help them develop accommodation and services for rough sleepers. This can include assistance, where appropriate, for emergency shelters and other direct access accommodation. £16m was allocated for this Initiative over the 3 years from 1997–98 to 1999–2000 and I recently announced additional funding of £14m to allow the Initiative to be extended to 2002. Heriot Watt and Stirling universities have been commissioned by the Department to undertake a preliminary evaluation of the Rough Sleepers Initiative and are due to report by September 1999.

Information on the number of places made available in emergency shelters over the forthcoming Christmas period and anticipated and past expenditure on emergency shelters is not held centrally.

A83

Mrs. Ray Michie: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland if he will take steps to compensate owners of

vehicles which are forced to use the Tarbert-Portavadie ferry service when the A83 is closed for repair during weekends in February and March 1999. [64263]

Mr. Macdonald: The legal position that compensation is not payable in such cases is well established but, in view of the difficulties that the closures will cause in this particular instance, the option of providing a temporarily enhanced ferry service is being considered.

Domestic Abuse Advertising Campaign

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Scotland how much the advertisement, which was produced by the Women's Unit and aimed at preventing women within a family from being assaulted by a male member of that family, cost to produce; and under which departmental budget head the cost will fall. [64302]

Mrs. Liddell: The Scottish Domestic Abuse Advertising Campaign, to which I think the hon. Gentleman refers, has been both initiated and funded by The Scottish Office. It is aimed at increasing public awareness of the problem of violence against women which occurs across all ages and social groups. The cost of producing the advertisement was £105,000.

WALES

S4C Board

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales if he will make a statement on the role of the Welsh Office in respect of the appointment of members of the Board of S4C—Sianel Pedwar Cymru; and what is his policy in respect of such appointments. [63158]

Mr. Michael: Appointments to the Board of S4C are made by the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. I am consulted on these appointments at the short-listing stage and before appointments are finally made.

My Department supports the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in the administrative work involved in making these appointments. Two vacancies for members of S4C were advertised in July, and my Department has handled inquiries and the receipt of applications. One of my officials will chair the interview panel, which will also include the Chair of S4C and an independent member.

My policy is to offer my right hon. Friend every assistance in selecting for these appointments the persons best qualified and suited to hold them, bearing in mind the range of skills and knowledge required for the Board.

National Assembly

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much the Government plans to spend on public information about the National Assembly. [63405]

Mr. Michael: Information will be made available to the public in a number of different ways—through publication of leaflets and documents; via information on the Assembly's web site on the internet; and through the arrangements we are putting in place for broadcasting the Assembly's plenary and committee sessions.

Provision for the first year of the Assembly has not yet been finalised. The £580,000 annual cost of the broadcasting contract, which I announced recently, will be shared between the Assembly and the resident broadcasters—BBC Wales Cymru; HTV Wales Cymru and S4C.

Additionally, my department is running an information campaign prior to the first elections for the Assembly. Some £550,000 will be spent on the first phase of this activity.

Ministerial School Visits (Monmouth)

Mr. Swayne: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how many ministerial visits to schools in the Monmouth constituency have taken place since 3 September 1998. [63406]

Mr. Michael: One. I visited Croesyceiliog Comprehensive School on 11 December.

Barnett Formula

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what consultation he has initiated relating to future funding of United Kingdom programmes located in Wales which are currently outside the provisions of the Barnett formula; and if he will make a statement. [63477]

Mr. Michael: The Government of Wales Act 1998 provided for the Transfer of Functions Order to be made to transfer Ministerial functions to the National Assembly for Wales. This Order was published in draft for public consultation on 12 November. Until the content of the Order has been finalised it is not possible to state with certainty what functions will transfer. Work is continuing within Government to finalise the text of the Order and to establish whether any programme's expenditure relates to those functions which will transfer. Funds will be transferred as necessary on this basis.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63913]

Mr. Michael: The information requested is as follows:

(a) £98,228

(b) £1,640,021

(c) £55,128

Total expenditure £1,793,377.

All expenditure figures are to end of November 1998.

Education Expenditure (Flintshire)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what the standard spending assessment for education is per pupil in Flintshire local education authority; and if he will make a statement. [63939]

Mr. Hain: Standard spending assessments in Wales are not earmarked for any particular service, with the exception of the police. My right hon. Friend announced on 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 229, that he proposes to provide an additional £70 million for

education in the local government revenue settlement for 1999–2000 and the allocation for Flintshire will be announced next year.

Special Educational Needs

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what measures he is taking to reduce delays in the statementing of children; and if he will make a statement. [63940]

Mr. Hain: The Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations 1994 set time limits for making assessments and statements of SEN. Latest Audit Commission figures, for 1996–97, show that less than half of the draft statements were prepared within the deadline. The Government are committed to improving performance on statementing. The approaches we intend to adopt will be set out in the Welsh Office Action Programme on SEN which is being prepared in the light of the consultation on "The BEST for Special Education" green paper. We will publish the programme early in the New Year.

State Aid

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales how much state and agency aid, including Regional Selective Assistance has been given to projects in the counties of *(a)* Clwyd and *(b)* Flintshire since 1990; and if he will make a statement. [63936]

Mr. Hain: A range of assistance, including grant aid, has been provided by the Welsh Office, the Department of Trade and Industry, the Welsh Development Agency, the Development Board for Rural Wales, the Wales Tourist Board, the Training and Enterprise Councils, local authorities and other business development organisations. Information on all of these is not held centrally.

Grants offered since 1990 under Regional Selective Assistance (the main form of regional aid in Wales), Regional Investment Grant, and Regional Innovation Grant were as follows:

£ million

	Clwyd	*Flintshire*
Regional Selective Assistance	118.0	61.2
Regional Investment Grant	1.9	0.9
Regional Innovation Grant	3.5	1.5

In total, these grants supported some 636 different projects with a projected total investment value of around £1 billion, and which should create or safeguard over 18,000 jobs.

Assisted Areas

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what percentage of Wales currently has assisted area status; and if he will make a statement. [63935]

Mr. Hain: The map of the Assisted Areas established in 1993 covers approximately 74 per cent. of Wales's population.

Busway (Shotton Steelworks to Chester)

Mr. Barry Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales when he estimates that the former railway from Shotton Steelworks to Chester will be converted into a dedicated bus route; at what cost; and if he will make a statement. [63941]

Mr. Hain: I understand that Flintshire County Council are developing proposals to convert into a guided busway the disused railway line which runs from Chester into the Deeside Development Zone. The authority has bid for Transport Grant support for preliminary design work on the project, which has an estimated total cost of £7.5 million. I will shortly be announcing my decisions on Transport Grant support for 1999–2000, and I will be writing to my hon. Friend at that time.

Ethnic Monitoring

Mr. McDonnell: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what plans he has to include Irish as a category in his Department's ethnic monitoring of staff recruitment. [63877]

Mr. Michael: The overriding principle of Civil Service recruitments is that they should be fair, and selection should be on merit at each stage.

Monitoring in this area is based on ethnic origin, and not nationality. The nine ethnic minority origin categories monitored by my Department are based on those used in the 1991 census which did not include an Irish category. They will be reviewed in the light of any suggested changes for the 2001 Population Census.

Local Government Finance

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Wales what provision was made in the Local government settlement for Wales to enable local authorities to meet their obligations in terms of the implementation of the single status agreement for their employees. [64390]

Mr. Michael: The local government settlement for Wales is generous and allows local authorities a degree of flexibility to deal with issues that affect them. The single status deal was agreed directly between the unions and local authorities. The Government did not require it and I am therefore not providing specific funding for it through the local government revenue settlement.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Fairness at Work

Ms Rosie Winterton: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what progress he is making on the consultation on the Fairness at Work White Paper. [64242]

Mr. Mandelson: The White Paper on Fairness at Work was published in May and the consultation period ended in July. Since then, the Government have been developing the policies in the White Paper to form legislative proposals.

We remain fully committed to the principles in the White Paper, but have also listened closely to the concerns expressed in the consultation to develop sensible, balanced legislation that will represent a settlement for the whole Parliament and endure beyond.

As the Competitiveness White Paper highlighted, a key feature of our top performing companies is a culture which promotes fairness and trust and creates the right conditions for business success. This Bill will promote in all UK companies the standards of the best modern employment relationships.

I intend to bring forward a Bill in the New Year. The Government are committed to action or have taken action on all 29 of the proposals in the White Paper.

I am depositing in the Library of the House copies of letters which I have written to the TUC and CBI which contain a detailed summary of our intentions for the Bill.

The following are the key points:

Trade union recognition will essentially follow the procedure within the White Paper. However, we intend to build in measures to ensure that the recognition procedure functions effectively and credibly. A revitalised Central Arbitration Committee (CAC) will have discretion in cases involving automatic recognition and the Secretary of State will also be able to issue guidance to the CAC. We also intend that employees campaigning for recognition should have protection from dismissal or action short of dismissal.

We intend to offer a real incentive to employers to put in place proper voluntary systems to avoid unfair dismissals. We will therefore be raising the limit for compensation for unfair dismissal from £12,000 to £50,000 and index linking that sum in the future.

The Bill will safeguard the fundamental right of employers and employees to reach individual contracts which differ from the terms of any collective agreement. However, we will protect employees from being forced into signing individual contracts where a collective agreement exists.

We will also provide protection for those engaged in lawfully organised official industrial action. It will be automatically unfair to dismiss employees for the first eight weeks of the action. Thereafter dismissal will be fair provided that the employer has taken all reasonable procedural steps to resolve the dispute.

As outlined in the White Paper we will be bringing forward a package of Family Friendly measures to ensure that as many people who want to work should have the chance to do so.

Parliamentary Questions

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many written parliamentary questions on the Millennium Experience he has responded to since assuming responsibility for the New Millennium Experience Company; and in how many cases he has issued holding replies. [63321]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 10 December 1998]:* From the records kept by my officials the best estimate is that I have answered 382 written parliamentary questions since assuming responsibility for the New Millennium Experience Company in July 1997. 68 of those answers received holding replies.

Millennium Exhibition

Mr. Peter Ainsworth: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what agreements exist between the New Millennium Experience Company and IMG in relation to IMG's work on attracting sponsors for the Millennium Exhibition. [62777]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to the answer I gave to the hon. Member for Christchurch (Mr. Chope) on 14 December 1998, *Official Report,* column *363.*

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a copy of the standard terms and conditions of sponsorship in respect of the New Millennium Experience Company. [62002]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 1 December 1998]:* I have today placed copies of the New Millennium Experience Company's (NMEC) outline approach to official sponsors in the Library of the House. This paper sets out the NMEC's approach to the rights and benefits applicable to Official Sponsors of the Millennium Experience and provides the basis on which sponsorship discussions, leading to contractual arrangements are taken forward. Contractual documents between the NMEC and sponsors are commercially confidential.

Mr. Alan Simpson: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what percentage of the building materials used at the Millennium Site for National Celebration has been transported to the site by river. [62039]

Mr. Mandelson: In the initial stages of the Dome's construction and site preparation, aggregates were delivered to the site by river. The New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) considers the use of the river for transportation of building materials at every opportunity, taking account of cost.

Parts of the new piers at the site are being manufactured in the Medway and will be brought up the Thames to be put in place.

Research Awards

Mr. Bennett: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list for each of the last five years the percentage of *(a)* money awarded as research grants and *(b)* actual grants to former polytechnics and colleges of higher education by each of the national research councils in relation to the total moneys allocated as research awards to higher education institutions. [63174]

Mr. Battle: The available data are shown in the following table:

	Expenditure on research grants to former polytechnics/colleges of higher education as % of total expenditure at higher education institutions	*Number of research grants to former polytechnics/colleges of higher education as % of total grants awarded to higher education institutions*
Economic and social science research council		
1993–94	[1]n/a	2.30
1994–95	4.00	3.40
1995–96	[1]n/a	10.20
1996–97	4.00	7.20
1997–98	4.90	7.70
Particle physics and astronomy research council		
1993–94	0.38	2.81
1994–95	0.63	1.56
1995–96	1.47	1.72
1996–97	0.48	2.06
1997–98	0.76	3.50

	Expenditure on research grants to former polytechnics/colleges of higher education as % of total expenditure at higher education institutions	Number of research grants to former polytechnics/colleges of higher education as % of total grants awarded to higher education institutions
Medical research council		
1993–94	[2]n/a	[2]n/a
1994–95	0.17	0.45
1995–96	0.35	0.27
1996–97	0.21	0.25
1997–98	0.08	n/a
Biotechnology and biological sciences research council		
1993–94	*n/a	*n/a
1994–95	0.92	0.80
1995–96	1.34	1.00
1996–97	1.42	1.10
1997–98	1.25	0.90
Engineering and physical sciences research council		
1993–94	[3]n/a	[3]n/a
1994–95	7.1	8.9
1995–96	4.4	6.2
1996–97	4.1	5.2
1997–98	3.9	5.0
Natural environment research council		
1993–94	0.72	2.80
1994–95	0.67	3.10
1995–96	0.37	2.90
1996–97	0.86	3.80
1997–98	0.81	3.30

[1] These figures are not available due to an error on the database which will be rectified when it is replaced in 1999.
[2] Figures prior to 1994–95 are not comparable due to changes in recording and indexation.
[3] EPSRC commenced operations on 1 April 1994.
* BBSRC commended operations in 1994.

Redundancy Claims

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what measures he is taking to improve the efficiency of the Redundancy Pay Services Department offices in processing redundancy claims. [64519]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Redundancy Payments Service has considerably simplified the process of handling claims with a new computer system. This has enabled claims to be sent direct to the Service rather than through insolvency practitioners, cutting out delays and also saving about £1 million a year in administrative expenditure, while allowing for a small increase in the number of staff handling claims. It has also enabled claims for different types of payment to be combined, which were previously made separately. Improvements to the new system are still being made in the light of subsequent operational experience. An officer has also been nominated in each office to ensure that complaints from customers are addressed quickly and any necessary lessons learned. Their direct telephone numbers will be published in the Service's Charter leaflet in the New Year and issued with every redundancy claim form.

Heat and Power Plants

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on his policy on the sanctioning of combined heat and power plants, with particular reference to distributed heating schemes. [64108]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* I refer the hon. Member to paragraphs 10.42 to 10.51 of the Energy White Paper, "Conclusions of the Review of Energy Sources for Power Generation and Government response to fourth and fifth Reports of the Trade and Industry Committee". Decisions since the White Paper have demonstrated our positive commitment to combined heat and power:

Grangemouth CHP announced 30 October.

Shotton and Castleford CHPs announced 3 December.

Export Missions

Mr. Boswell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what criteria he adopts in *(a)* selecting and *(b)* carrying out or aborting export missions. [62401]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* Export missions are selected on the basis of furthering my Department's objectives.

They are aborted only as a result of unforeseen circumstances such as unexpected Parliamentary business.

Science Spending

Mrs. Butler: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what assessment he has made of the relationship between science spending and industrial productivity. [60971]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Investment in scientific research is essential to increasing industrial productivity: that is why we have secured an extra £1.4 billion for the Science Base. We must also harness better the assets of our excellent knowledge base and secure them for competitive advantage. The Competitiveness White Paper highlights this need to enhance exploitation of technology and knowledge as a key feature of a modern industrial policy.

Initiatives taken this year to enhance the exploitation of science and technology and so to encourage industrial productivity include:

a doubling of funding for the Teaching Company Scheme to promote the movement of people and knowledge between industry and the science base

an extension of the SMART scheme to stimulate business R&D in new products and processes

three new LINK programme this year, in response to priorities identified by Foresight and representing Government funding of up to £15 million.

the University Challenge Fund scheme, a competition set up by Government, the Wellcome Trust and the Gatsby Charitable Foundation offering £40 million to help universities set up seed funds to turn good research into good business.

Science Enterprise Challenge, a £25 million scheme to support up to 8 Institutes for Enterprise in universities and to introduce courses in enterprise in science and engineering curricula.

the new Higher Education Reach Out fund (HERO) providing £50 million over 3 years to ensure students acquire the skills that business needs, and to improve business access to universities' resources and services.

Utilities (Competition)

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the United Kingdom Government regard competition in United Kingdom utilities as fair when it

involves competition between a British plc responsible to its shareholders and an overseas state owned company. [62193]

Dr. Howells: The European Commission has exclusive competence as regards illegal state aids, including financial advantages which might be thought to arise from state-ownership. If the British Government had concerns in a particular case, they would make them known to the European Commission.

Any merger involving a state owned enterprise would be considered impartially on its merits by the relevant competition authorities.

Airlines

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many responses were received by the deadline of 4 September to his invitation for comments on the Director General of Fair Trading's advice on the proposed alliance between British Airways and American Airlines. [64713]

Mr. Mandelson: The Office of Fair Trading received forty one written representations following my invitation on 6 August for comments to be sent to them on the Director-General of Fair Trading's advice.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry for what reason he has delayed announcing a final decision on approval of the alliance between British Airways and American Airlines beyond the Autumn as announced in a Departmental press release of 8 July. [64714]

Mr. Mandelson: No announcement has been delayed. I have not yet reached a final decision.

The press notice of 8 July made clear that the next steps in the process were public consultation on both the Commission's proposals and the remedies proposed by my predecessor. It also made clear that the alliance would need approval from the US competition authorities, and that there would need to be a new UK/US bilateral air services agreement before the alliance could come into effect.

I sought comments on the DGFT's interim advice to me, which was published on 6 August. The DGFT's advice stated that the Commission had not reached a firm view on the appropriate remedy in some areas, and that a number of important matters remained uncertain.

Meanwhile, progress has been slower than expected in the negotiations with the US towards a new air services agreement.

I have told BA, in reply to a letter dated 2 December which said that a final decision on the alliance should be deferred (at least until the position on open skies was clearer), that there were a number of issues on which more progress had to be made before I could reach a final decision.

Arms Exports (South Africa)

Ann Clwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if the export to South Africa of British Aerospace Gripen fighters and Hawk aircraft and GKN Westland Maritime helicopters will be supported by export credit guarantees. [64498]

Mr. Mandelson: ECGD has been approached with a view to providing finance support in respect of these prospective transactions and if ECGD were to provide any such support it would be subject to ECGD's procedures and continuing cover availability.

Export Finance Scheme

Ms Coffey: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what the Government proposes to replace the Fixed Rate Export Finance Scheme on its expiry on 31 December. [64786]

Mr. Mandelson: Following a conference chaired by Lord Clinton-Davis on 24 June, ECGD, along with banks, exporters, and their representative associations have been working to identify possible ways to enhance the competitiveness of UK exporters and to improve the cost-effectiveness of ECGD interest rate support. In order to allow the outcome of these discussions to be taken into account in negotiating a successor scheme, and to ensure continuity of service to exporters and banks in the meantime, the Government have decided to extend the validity of the current Scheme for a further three months until 31 March 1999.

Millennium Compliance

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps are being taken to ensure that all nuclear installations worldwide are fully millennium-compliant; and what contingency plans are in place in the event of multiple nuclear emergencies overseas. [64453]

Mr. Battle: Responsibility for ensuring safety at nuclear installations, and for dealing with any emergencies which might arise at those installations, rests with the state in which the installation is situated. At the international level, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in Vienna and the Nuclear Energy Agency in Paris are acting as co-ordinators of millennium information for the nuclear sector worldwide, and have already held sessions on millennium preparedness, with further major workshops planned. Other nuclear organisations are contributing as appropriate.

In multilateral and bilateral contacts with overseas nuclear safety regulatory authorities, the United Kingdom's Health and Safety Executive—which for some years has been overseeing the preparations of the UK's nuclear installations for the millennium—has been encouraging other states to take appropriate action to address this issue. Mr. Laurence Williams, the UK's Chief Inspector of Nuclear Installations, presented a well received paper on millennium preparedness to the IAEA Senior Regulator's meeting in Vienna in September 1998. A copy of that paper will be placed in the Library of the House shortly.

Both the IAEA and European Union have established and tested international systems for the early notification of any overseas nuclear accident. The UK also has bilateral arrangements for the early notification of such accidents with a number of overseas governments. The Government's National Response Plan, co-ordinated by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the

Regions, makes arrangements for the UK's response in dealing with any consequences of an overseas nuclear accident. The Plan draws on the RIMNET national radiation monitoring and nuclear emergency response system, which also provides the UK with a second independent line of defence, should for any reason the early notification systems fail. RIMNET also links into the Meteorological Office's predictions of the areas of the UK likely to be affected by any overseas accident.

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to ensure that all UK nuclear installations are fully millennium-compliant; and what contingency plans are in place in the event of a millennium-related nuclear emergency. [64452]

Mr. Battle: All UK nuclear operators have initiated major programmes of work to identify and address potential problems associated with the century date change issue. Those aspects of these programmes that address potential safety concerns are being monitored closely by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE). The HSE is satisfied with the actions being taken. If the HSE were not satisfied it would take robust enforcement action if it were appropriate, but if the licencees continue to make good progress in tackling the issue, the HSE anticipate this will not be necessary.

Operators anticipate that all essential work will be completed by mid-1999. This includes a re-testing of systems to provide confirmation that remedial action taken to rectify any safety problems that are identified has been effective. Contingency plans and business continuity plans will also be in place for the critical dates as a precaution against unforeseen threats to safety. Contingency plans against the possibility of a nuclear emergency are maintained and available for activation at any time.

Millennium Dome

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will place in the Library a copy of those provisions in agreements with corporate sponsors of zones in the millennium dome concerning *(a)* the content of the zone being sponsored and *(b)* the management of the zone being sponsored. [64422]

Mr. Mandelson: The contractual agreements between the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) and individual sponsors are commercially confidential. However, in terms of content and management they provide for the NMEC to retain the right of control over design, content, access to and operation of the exhibit zones. This ensures that the integrity of the Millennium Experience as the focus for the nation's millennium celebrations can not be compromised.

Mr. Dafis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will list the zones in the millennium dome for which armaments manufacturers would not be considered to be appropriate sponsors; [64395]

(2) if he will make provision for critics of corporate sponsors of zones in the millennium dome to have an opportunity to reply to claims made by the sponsors in cases where the sponsors are engaged in *(a)* the food industry, *(b)* the motor industry and *(c)* armaments manufacturing; [64396]

(3) what discussions he has had with representatives of the Church of England concerning the inclusion of armaments manufacturers amongst the corporate sponsors of the millennium dome; and what was the outcome of those discussions. [64397]

Mr. Mandelson: The Millennium Experience at Greenwich and its associated national programme of events and activities is the responsibility of the New Millennium Experience Company. This includes the development of the exhibit zones within the Dome and the procurement of sponsorship. I have had no discussions with the Church of England about sponsorship of the exhibit zones within the Dome. Anyone who wishes to criticise, or indeed support, sponsors' involvement in the Millennium Experience is free to do so through a range of channels, including by asking Parliamentary Questions.

Mr. Ottaway: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) how many visitors to the Dome are expected to come from each region of the United Kingdom and each European Union country in each week in 2000; [60882]

(2) how many visitors to the Dome are expected to come from each London borough in each month in 2000. [60883]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 27 November 1998]:* This information is not available in the categories or format requested and it would not be practicable for the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC) to make visitor estimates in this manner. For example, visitors from each of the London boroughs will not necessarily be residents of those boroughs. They could include school parties or friends and relations staying with residents, or indeed, tourists staying in the different boroughs.

Nuclear Physics (Postgraduate Courses)

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what estimate he has made of the number and percentage of students who have gained postgraduate qualifications in nuclear physics who then took up employment abroad; and if he will make a statement; [63386]

(2) what steps he has taken to encourage students to take up postgraduate courses in nuclear physics. [63387]

Mr. Battle: I understand that data are not available at a sufficient level of subject detail to provide an answer for all postgraduates. However, the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council has provided the following information based on an evaluation, last year, of the research students supported by the Council and by the former Science and Engineering Research Council and whose funding expired in the period between October 1991 and 1996. 53 students are known to have obtained PhDs in nuclear physics; of those 9 per cent. took posts overseas in their first jobs. No data are currently available on the number who remain abroad, but a further recent career path study of former Research Council students across a wide range of subject areas found that only 4 per cent. worked overseas in their first job and in their latest job, some ten years on.

The EPSRC allocates studentships to university departments based on the level of EPSRC-funded research activity on a programme by programme basis. There is no specific allocation based on funding of nuclear physics. Heads of Department have discretion to distribute their quota of studentships in an appropriate manner provided the relevant projects fall within the research remit of the EPSRC.

The Physics programme of EPSRC allocated 171 research studentships and collaborative (CASE) awards, and 39 advanced course studentships in 1997. Two of the advanced courses are in the area of nuclear physics, and the programme provides these two courses with 13 studentships. (Data are not readily available on the pass rate and employment destinations of the students on these two courses, but the career path study indicated that 99 per cent. of Research Council advanced course students gained their qualification).

The EPSRC has recently provided funding for a new Integrated Graduate Development Course in nuclear physics at the University of Liverpool, entitled "Radiometrics applied to Decommissioning and Radioactive Waste".

Nuclear Liability and Taxation Agreement

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make it his policy to promote an expanded bilateral Russian/UK agreement covering nuclear liability and taxation. [63107]

Mr. Battle: DTI officials intend to discuss the possibility with their Russian counterparts early next year. The Department is also considering with other Governments concerned what reasonable legal protection is needed for contractors engaged in clean-up work in Russia. More broadly it remains our objective to encourage Russia to ratify the Vienna Convention on Nuclear Liability.

Arms Exports

Ms Jenny Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many licences were granted to United Kingdom companies to export small arms between *(a)* 1 January and 30 June 1997, and *(b)* 1 July 1997 and 30 September 1998. [63439]

Mrs. Roche: The export of specified small arms is controlled under entries ML1 and PL5018 in the Export of Goods (Control) Order, which also cover specified accessories and specially designed components. The entry in the legislation under which the export of goods is controlled is known as their rating.

The Export Control Organisation's computer databases have been interrogated and the following results were obtained. Between 1 January 1997 and 30 September 1998, the numbers of Standard Individual Export Licences (SIELs) and Open Individual Export Licences (OIELs) issued during each period and covering the export of goods with the relevant ratings were as follows:

Individual Licences issued between 1 January 1997 and 30 September 1998 covering the export of goods with the rating ML1

Period	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
1 January 1997–30 June 1997	962	70
1 July 1997–30 September 1998	1,696	60

Individual Licences issued between 1 January 1997 and 30 September 1998 covering the export of goods with the rating PL5018

Period	*Number of SIELs issued covering goods with this rating*	*Number of OIELs issued covering goods with this rating*
1 January 1997–30 June 1997	99	69
1 July 1997–30 September 1998	84	43

This information should be considered in light of my answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Don Valley (Caroline Flint) on 30 October 1997, *Official Report*, columns *256–58*.

There is no internationally-agreed definition of "small arms". It is possible that some weapons controlled under other ratings could be called small arms; for instance, a 12-bore shotgun with a calibre greater than 12.7mm would be controlled under entry ML2.

Certain Open General Export Licences cover the return to specified countries of weapons controlled under entries ML1 and PL5018, subject to the conditions of the licence in each case: the Open General Export Licence (Export After Repair: Military Goods) and the Open General Export Licence (Export After Exhibition: Military Goods). In addition, the Open General Export Licence (Accompanied Personal Effects: Sporting Firearms) permits temporary exports for sporting or recreational purposes to Tanzania and Uganda. Copies of all Open General Export Licences valid at any time during the period are in the Library of the House.

British Nuclear Fuels Ltd

Mr. Jack: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry when he received the KPMG report on the future of BNFL; and when he expects to be in a position to make a statement on the report. [64569]

Mr. Battle: I refer the right hon. Member to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Blaenau Gwent (Mr. Smith) on 15 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *455*.

TRADE AND INDUSTRY

Electronic Book Formats

Mr. Nigel Jones: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has to introduce minimum standards for electronic book formats; and what representations he has received regarding the development of the XML and PDF formats. [62963]

Mr. Battle: The Department has no plans to introduce minimum standards for electronic book formats and has received no representations regarding the development of the XML and PDF formats.

Industrial Tribunal Claims

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many industrial tribunal claims initiated in 1994 still await a hearing. [64231]

Mr. Ian McCartney: In 1994–95, Employment Tribunals registered 88,061 applications which included 11,000 cases by people claiming part time worker pension rights. No statistical information is available to say how many cases initiated in 1994 remain in the tribunal system unheard. Currently 89 per cent. of cases receive a first hearing within 26 weeks of receipt. The majority of cases remaining in the system over a period of time are waiting the outcome of proceedings in other courts.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many official visits *(a)* he and *(b)* the Ministers in his Department have made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997; and if he will list them. [64135]

Mr. Mandelson: Since 2 May 1997 it has not yet been possible to include an official visit to Buckinghamshire in a DTI ministerial regional programme. However, DTI Ministers have undertaken visits to a number of the surrounding counties.

Internet (Paedophiles)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he is taking to stop the Internet in the United Kingdom being used by paedophiles. [64286]

Mrs. Roche: The law applies on-line as it does off-line with the result that each person is responsible for their own acts and omissions.

The Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) was established following discussions between the DTI, Home Office, the Police and Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to provide a voluntary industrial mechanism to supplement law enforcement. The IWF operates a hotline to which Internet users can report material which they believe may be illegal. This information is then passed on to the police and the ISP who is hosting the site. When the material originates in the UK, the ISP should then remove it from its server. The Police will take action to follow up any criminal offence. If UK service providers fail to act on IWF reports and the material is found to be illegal, they are liable for prosecution as accessories to the crime.

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will ask Internet service providers to control kids' chat lines to prevent paedophile messages being placed on them. [64287]

Mrs. Roche: The Department works with Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and law enforcement agencies to combat paedophile action on the internet. One result of this was the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) which was established following discussions between the DTI, Home Office, the Police and ISPs. One of the aims of the IWF is to hinder the use of the Internet to transmit illegal material, particularly child pornography. As part of their work to combat illegal material appearing on the Internet, they have processed complaints received about Chat lines.

Employee Savings Club

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he can take against company directors who operate a savings club for employees but do not open a separate savings account so that employees' savings are protected if that firm goes into liquidation. [64563]

Dr. Howells: In the event of a company being placed in liquidation, the conduct of its directors would be considered in the light of the Company Directors Disqualification Act 1986. Failing to protect employees' contributions to a savings club would be taken into account in deciding whether or not to bring disqualification proceedings.

If the contributions were to a holiday club the Secretary of State might be able to make payments to employees under section 184 of the Employment Rights Act 1996.

Redundancy Payments

Judy Mallaber: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) if he will instruct Redundancy Pay Services Department offices *(a)* to process claims for employees made redundant by a business or the Official Receiver as soon as the office makes the individual calculation and *(b)* not to wait for a whole batch of calculations for that business to be completed before making any individual payments; [64566]

(2) if he will take measures to ensure that all Redundancy Pay Services Department offices process immediately the claims of employees made redundant by the Official Receiver when their firm becomes insolvent. [64567]

Mr. Ian McCartney: The Redundancy Payments Service processes each claim as soon as possible after sufficient information to determine entitlement is available.

Wind Farms

Mr. Prior: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the use of

wind farms as an alternative to conventional power plants. [64344]

Mr. Battle: The Government are committed to a new and strong drive to develop renewable energy sources, including wind power.

We need to move away from dependence on fossil fuels. But this needs to be managed gradually so as not to damage the economy.

I am currently reviewing new and renewable energy policy, including consideration of what would be necessary and practical to achieve 10 per cent. of the UK's electricity needs from renewables by the year 2010 and how renewable sources can make an effective contribution to meeting requirements for future greenhouse gas reductions.

As a first step towards that new and strong drive, on 24 September 1998 I announced the fifth and largest Non-Fossil Fuel Obligation Order for 1177 Megawatts of renewable energy electricity capacity, including 368 Megawatts from wind energy. As at 30 September 1998, some 1,076 Megawatts of wind energy capacity had been contracted under NFFO, and 57 projects, totalling 137 Megawatts, were operational. Electricity costs from wind power in NFFO have more than halved on average to around the same cost as the average wholesale price for electricity from conventional plants but not yet at prices competitive with new gas-fired generation. NFFO5 contracts for the large wind energy band were at an average of 2.88p/kWh compared with the average Pool Selling Price of 2.67p/kWh in 1997/98.

On 2 September 1998 I launched a consultative document on opening up NFFO in future to offshore wind energy. I am now considering the responses to that exercise.

Minister for Science

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps the Minister for Science has taken to divest himself of his investments in *(a)* Diatech Ltd. and *(b)* Innotech Investments Ltd. [64504]

Mr. Mandelson: As my answer to the right hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Mr. Forth) made clear on 19 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *1050* all the Minister for Science's shareholdings, including those in Diatech and Innotech, have been placed in a blind trust. The blind trust was created on 31 July, 3 days after his appointment, and the legal formalities for transferring the shares were completed shortly afterwards.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what action he has taken to ensure that no conflict of interests arises in the consideration of matters relating to biotechnology by the Minister for Science. [64409]

Mr. Mandelson: I refer the right hon. Member to my reply on 19 October 1998, *Official Report*, column *1050*.

Post Office

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry (1) what estimate he has made of the impact of the proposed Post Office changes on public spending totals in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02; [64404]

(2) what estimate he has made of the loss to the Treasury from the revised Post Office external finance limit in *(a)* 1999–2000, *(b)* 2000–01 and *(c)* 2001–02. [64411]

Mr. Mandelson: As a self-financing public corporation the Post Office is outside my Departmental Expenditure Limit. Capital expenditure by the PO contributes to Annually Managed Expenditure. The impact on the Public Sector Net Cash Requirement is broadly equivalent to the Post Office's External Finance Requirement, which will depend on a number of factors including the level of profits in future years and any borrowing. As I announced on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns 21–39, an External Financing Requirement (EFR) of minus £207 million has been set for 1999–2000 and in following years the EFR will be equivalent to 40 per cent. of post tax profits. As indicated in the reply given by the then Secretary of State to my hon. Friend the Member for the City of York (Mr. Bayley) on 17 July 1998, *Official Report*, column *356* the EFRs of minus £335 million announced then were an interim measure pending the outcome of the review.

Mr. Redwood: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what restrictions will be placed on the Post Office's permitted scope for the acquisition of overseas companies under his proposals for its future. [64403]

Mr. Mandelson: Under the Post Office Act 1969 the Post Office can make acquisitions, including overseas acquisitions, that are "requisite, advantageous or convenient" for the purpose of its business. The increase in retained net profits I announced on 7 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *21–24*, will enable the Post Office to finance an increased level of investment. However the Government recognise that larger growth, including acquisitions and joint ventures, may require prudent borrowing. The Government will approve normal Post Office requests for borrowing for investment cases that are commercially robust. Separate fast track arrangements will be put in place for considering the largest investments. Further details will be provided in the White Paper to be published in the New Year.

Tanzania (Medical Supplies)

Mr. Steen: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will issue an export licence before Christmas to enable the shipment of a LandRover loaded with medical equipment given by the people of Kingsbridge, South Devon, to Tanzania to be used by the Nzega District Hospital. [64435]

Mrs. Roche: Given the humanitarian nature of the export, I am able to inform the hon. Member that this export licence was issued on Tuesday 15 December.

Scotland Act 1998 (Schedule 5)

Mr. Swinney: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will list *(a)* total expenditure and *(b)* expenditure by programme over £50,000 by his Department in Scotland on areas covered by each of the exceptions under heads (i) C and (ii) D in Schedule 5 of the Scotland Act 1998. [63796]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* This information is not held centrally and accurate figures on the exceptions under heads C and D could only be obtained at disproportionate cost, if at all.

Green Technology

Mr. Matthew Taylor: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to promote new green technologies and businesses. [62383]

Mr. Battle: The Government recognise the enormous potential of the UK environmental industry to develop new green technologies which both provide solutions to environmental problems and boost the UK economy. Support in promoting the activities of this sector is provided through a number of activities.

DTI plays an important role in supporting the science and engineering base and business to develop and exploit sustainable technologies and processes. Science and engineering research received a major boost of £1.1 billion as a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review.

The Foresight Steering Group has identified sustainable technologies as a top priority. Specific initiatives under the Foresight programme include the Vehicle Link programme (which has recently received a further £5 million) and sustainable technologies for a cleaner world. Foresight is currently being developed to make it more effective and will be underpinned by the theme of sustainable development. Earlier this month eighteen projects received Foresight LINK Awards, which bring together business and the science base to work in areas identified by the Foresight programme as important to the future prosperity and quality of life of the UK.

The Cleaner Vehicles Task Force was launched last year to provide a partnership between government, manufacturers, users and pressure groups to identify practical measures to reduce the environmental impact of vehicles.

The LINK scheme also plays an important part in developing and transferring knowledge on new sustainable technologies. Research ranges from the development of biotechnologies to remove pollutants from streams and soils, to using earth observation satellites for monitoring the natural environment.

The renewables industry received a boost last September with the announcement of the largest ever obligation on the Public Electricity Suppliers to secure 1177 MW of new electricity generating capacity from renewable sources of energy.

The Environment Technology Best Practice Programme (ETBPP) produces high quality technical advice in relation to specific industrial sectors including examples of businesses which have established good practice procedures and made use of new technologies.

The Joint DTI/DETR Environmental Markets Unit (JEMU) encourages development of British businesses in the environmental sector and promotes the UK as a supplier of environmental solutions. JEMU's Business Plan, which was launched on 18 March by Michael Meacher and myself, details planned activities designed to raise the profile of the industry both at home and overseas.

We are committed to working with business and others to identify and promote ways in which firms can move towards sustainability. The Government's consultation document "Sustainable Business" published in June, set out some ideas on how this can be best achieved. The responses from business—over 500 were received—were generally positive, and will be reflected in our new national Sustainable Development Strategy which is due to be published early in the New Year.

Millennium Dome (Sports)

Mr. Tredinnick: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what plans he has for sporting activities to take place in the Dome. [62199]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 3 December 1998]:* Responsibility for the content of the Millennium Dome lies with the New Millennium Experience Company (NMEC). The NMEC has no plans for sporting events to take place in the Dome. However, the aims of the Serious Play Zone are to recognise and present traditional sports in an exciting and futuristic manner.

Receiverships

Dr. Vis: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many directors of quoted companies have asked his Department to investigate the events leading to receivership in each of the last five years for which figures are available. [64633]

Dr. Howells: Information is not maintained in the manner requested by my hon. Friend. Such requests are minimal.

Post-devolution Expenditure

Mr. Wigley: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how much expenditure is forecast to be incurred by his Department in Wales in 1998–99 as part of UK-and Britain-wide expenditure programmes; and what provision will be made in relation to this expenditure once the National Assembly for Wales has been established. [63479]

Mr. Mandelson: The Government of Wales Act 1998 provided for a Transfer of Functions Order to be made to transfer Ministerial functions to the National Assembly for Wales. This Order was published in draft for public consultation on 12 November. Work is continuing within Government to finalise the text of the Order and until the content of the Order has been finalised, it is not possible to state with certainty what functions will transfer. It is therefore too early to say to what extent programme expenditure which is currently administered by my Department may relate to functions which will transfer to the National Assembly for Wales. Work is taking place to establish the extent of any such expenditure and to assess the need for any consequential transfer of funds to the Assembly.

My Department does not make forecasts of how much of its expenditure will be incurred in each country of the United Kingdom, although such information is published on a retrospective basis in the Public Expenditure Statistical Analyses (PESA).

Freephone

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will investigate plans by Oftel to alter freephone numbers. [63655]

Mrs. Roche *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The administration of the National Numbering Scheme is a matter for Oftel. Oftel consulted earlier this year on several options for changing the system of freephone numbers. Oftel is currently examining all the comments it has received before deciding on the way forward. Oftel is due to issue a Statement on the results of the consultation next year and the Department will examine it closely.

Internet

Mr. Cotter: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what steps he has taken to prevent companies trading fraudulently on the Internet by using as a domain name the registered name or trademark of another company. [63414]

Dr. Howells *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The Trade Marks Act 1994 contains provisions to protect against the fraudulent use of a registered trade mark. The common law tort of passing-off protects against false representation, where a company attempts to take unfair advantage or their action is detrimental to reputation of another.

These provisions can be applied to fraudulent use of domain names. In a recent case (British Telecommunications Plc et al. *v.* One in a Million & others), both the High Court and the Court of Appeal said that the registration of trade marks as domain names was unfair and detrimental to the reputation of the trade mark owner and such registrations were also an infringement of the trade mark owner's rights.

Nuclear Fuels

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry what representations were made to the Minister of State during his visit to Dounreay on 18 November; and if he will make a statement on Her Majesty's Government's position regarding the review of the policy of reprocessing spent nuclear fuels. [62669]

Mr. Battle *[holding answer 16 December 1998]:* During my visit to Dounreay on 18 November, I met members of the UKAEA management, staff and unions. We discussed a number of issues relating to the work of Dounreay, and in particular UKAEA's plans to respond to the HSE/SEPA audit of safety at Dounreay.

The Government's position on reprocessing spent nuclear fuels was placed in the Libraries of the House as indicated in my answer to the House of 30 January 1998, *Official Report,* column *415.*

Defence Exports

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many civil servants are employed in his Department to assist in supporting and promoting defence exports; and at what cost. [64462]

Mr. Battle: None of my officials are employed full-time in defence export promotion. However, a part of the workload of several DTI officials is on such activity, where they work alongside the Defence Exports Services Organisation of the MOD.

Medical and Pharmaceutical Equipment

Ms Drown: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many civil servants are employed in his Department to assist in supporting and promoting exports of medical and pharmaceutical equipment; and at what cost. [64463]

Mr. Mandelson: Three civil servants in the Export Promotion Command of my Department work on promoting exports in this sector, in liaison with officials from the Department of Health and an Export Promoter, seconded from industry. The running costs of the civil servants themselves, excluding the programme budget for which they are responsible, is £114,399.

Radioactive Waste, Germany

Mr. Llew Smith: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, pursuant to his answer of 7 December 1998, *Official Report,* column *69,* concerning BNFL's reprocessing contract, if he will place in the Library copies of each of the inter-governmental exchanges of letters on nuclear waste to which the answer refers. [63898]

Mr. Battle: Further to the answer I gave to my hon. Friend of 7 December 1998, *Official Report,* column *69,* I have arranged for copies of the relevant inter-governmental exchanges of letters underpinning BNFL's overseas reprocessing contracts since 1976 to be laid in the Library of the House.

Export Licences

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many of the applications for export licences which were outstanding on 24 June *(a)* have been granted, *(b)* have been refused and *(c)* are still outstanding. [61928]

Mrs. Roche: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

Mrs. Gillan: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry how many export licence applications awaiting decisions between 24 June and 23 November had been waiting for *(a)* up to 20 days, *(b)* up to 40 days, *(c)* up to 60 days and *(d)* more than 60 days. [61927]

Mrs. Roche: I will write to the hon. Member as soon as possible and place a copy of that letter in the Library of the House.

Electronic Commerce

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry if he will make a statement on the implications for the competitiveness of electronic commerce in the United Kingdom of the decisions made at the December meeting of the Wassenaar Arrangement. [63525]

Mr. Mandelson *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The Government are committed to making the UK the best environment in the world for electronic commerce by

the end of this Parliament. Our strategy for achieving this will be set out in the forthcoming White Paper on Competitiveness. The recent agreement in the Wassenaar Agreement, which has modernised and relaxed the export controls on encryption technology, will contribute towards this strategy.

SOCIAL SECURITY

Contributions Agency

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if it is the present policy of the Contributions Agency to require its staff to retire at age 60 years; [64415]

(2) if he will state the whole time equivalent employment at each Contributions Agency site in the Tyne and Wear area at *(a)* 1 April 1996, *(b)* 1 April 1997 and *(c)* the most recent available date; and how many employees were over 60 years of age at each date. [64419]

Mr. Timms: This is a matter for George Bertram, the Chief Executive of the Contributions Agency. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from George Bertram to Mr. Jim Cousins, dated 17 December 1998:

As Chief Executive of the Contributions Agency (CA) I have responsibility for answering questions about operational matters relating to the Agency. I have been asked to reply to your questions about the Agency's retirement policy and staffing levels in the Tyne and Wear area.

The CA's current retirement policy is based upon corporate Department of Social Security policy and requires all employees to retire at age 60. The policy was implemented on 31 July 1998. The previous policy required employees to retire at age 60 unless they were employed at Executive Officer level or below. For Executive Officers retirement was at age 62 and for employees below this level at age 65. Transitional arrangements enable employees at Executive Officer level or below who were over age 60 on or after 31 July 1998 to be retained until no later than 31 July 1999 in the following circumstances:

Their performance, attendance and conduct fully met the requirements of the job;

Their job is not included in an area of work where there were planned redundancies;

There are no local early retirement schemes planned for employees at the same level;

Their retirement would lead, either directly or indirectly, to the need for external recruitment;

The hardship that would be suffered would override any existing business need.

CA has no plans to extend the transitional arrangements beyond 31 July 1999. From 1 April 1999 CA will become part of Inland Revenue. Their retirement policy requires employees to retire at age 60. CA management is in negotiation with Trade Unions to determine the policy that will apply to CA employees on transfer. The outcome of these negotiations has not yet been concluded.

The number of CA employees employed at each site on the Newcastle estate on 1 April 1996, 1 April 1997 and 1 December 1998 are as follows:

Location	*Number of CA staff*
1 April 1996	
Scottish Life House	94
Lancaster House	97
Hebburn	507
Bellway Stores	17
Alfred Wilson House	476
Kenton Bar	601
Broadway West	52
Longbenton Main Site	4,156
1 April 1997	
Scottish Life House	94
Lancaster House	97
Hebburn	507
Bellway Stores	17
Alfred Wilson House	476
Kenton Bar	443
Broadway West	26
Longbenton Main Site	4,040
1 December 1998	
Hebburn	507
Bellway Stores	17
Alfred Wilson House	476
Kenton Bar	540
Broadway West	26
Longbenton Main Site	4,134

The number of employee's aged 60 or over on the above dates are as follows:

Date	*Number of employees aged 60 or over*
1 April 1996	118
1 April 1997	90
1 December 1998	50

This data is the total number of employee's aged 60 or over in all buildings on the Newcastle estate. We do not keep figures for each individual building so I cannot provide you with this data from our records.

Disability Living Allowance

Mr. Ian Stewart: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many case DLA case files were mislaid or lost prior to their referral to the Independent Tribunal Service in the last 12 months; and how many of these related to claimants who are mentally ill. [64216]

Mr. Timms: The administration of Disability Living Allowance is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to my hon. Friend.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Ian Stewart, dated 16 December 1998:

The Secretary of State for Social Security has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many Disability Living Allowance cases were mislaid or lost prior to their referral to the Independent Tribunal Service (ITS) in the last 12 months; and how many of these related to claimants who are mentally ill.

The information you have requested is not routinely kept and would only be available at disproportionate cost.

I am aware of only one case in the last 12 months where the papers were mislaid prior to their referral to the ITS where the person concerned was suffering from a mental illness.

I am sorry I cannot be of more help.

Benefit Integrity Project

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many appeals there have been against findings made under the Benefit Integrity Project in the last year for which figures are available. [64691]

Mr. Timms: The administration of the Benefits Integrity Project is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, dated 16 December 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question asking how many appeals there have been against findings made under the Benefit Integrity Project (BIP) in the last year for which figures are available.

As at 31 October 1998 there have been 22,689 reviews and 5,925 appeals received following BIP action.

You may find it helpful to know that statistical information about the BIP, including details of reviews and appeals are published monthly and placed in the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many civil servants will be redeployed following the cancellation of the Benefit Integrity Project. [64689]

Mr. Timms: The administration of the Benefit Integrity Project is a matter for the Chief Executive of the Benefits Agency, Peter Mathison. He will write to the hon. Member.

Letter from Peter Mathison to Mr. Elfyn Llwyd, dated 17 December 1998:

The Secretary of State has asked me to reply to your recent Parliamentary Question about how many civil servants will be redeployed after the cancellation of the Benefits Integrity Project.

The number of people engaged on the Benefit Integrity Project as at 30 November 1998 was the equivalent of 365.54 full-time staff.

The Benefits Integrity Project will be replaced by a new modern review system to carry out regular checks of existing awards to ensure entitlement remains correct. However there is no estimate of the final numbers of staff that will be required.

I hope you find this reply helpful.

Mr. Llwyd: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the Benefit Integrity Project's cancellation will come into effect; and if he will make a statement. [64690]

Mr. Timms: The Benefit Integrity Project will be replaced by a new, even-handed system of review, sensitive to people's circumstances and fair because it will provide for awards to be increased as well as decreased in line with entitlement. We will introduce the new process as soon as possible and aim to have it in place by April 1999 but our primary concern is to get it right rather than to introduce it quickly. We are discussing the way forward with the Disability Benefits Forum.

National Insurance

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how much is planned to be spent up to 1 April 1999 on the online national insurance contribution records system; and how much has been planned for the next three year period. [64417]

Mr. Timms: If the supplier were to process anticipated volumes, the NIRS2 budget for the financial year to 1 April 1999 would be £5.301 million. The base annual service charge for NIRS2 over the next three years is budgeted at £6.850 million per annum. This amount is subject to volumes of work processed and also any charges for agreed enhancements to the system.

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list the implementation milestones with their dates for the online national insurance contribution records system; and to what extent these have been achieved to date. [64420]

Mr. Timms: The original contract allowed for the delivery of the National Insurance Recording System over three releases between February 1997 and April 1999. A subsequent Deed of Amendment was agreed in July 1996, which allowed for a phased delivery of the first release. Although incorporating the original timeframe, the phasing of delivery between those dates was significantly altered.

Release 1a. The contractual delivery date of 10 February 1997 was achieved.

Release 1b. The original contractual date of 27 October 1997 was not achieved. Delivery took place on the 28 January 1998.

Release 1c. The original contractual date of 6 April 1998 was not achieved. Part of the service was delivered on the 13 July 1998, and final acceptance took place on the 28 August 1998.

Release 2/3. Contractual delivery date is the 6 April 1999, and this is currently on target.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what is his estimate of the number of people currently working who have not paid sufficient national insurance contributions to qualify for incapacity benefit. [64222]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available in the form requested. The latest available information is that the number of people working and paying National Insurance contributions who had not paid sufficient contributions to qualify for Incapacity Benefit in 1997 was about 4.4 million. In addition, the Family Resources Survey estimates that there are about 2 million employees who earn below the lower earnings limit at any one time and therefore would not pay National Insurance contributions.

Notes:

1. Figures come from different data sources and should not be aggregated.

2. To qualify for Incapacity Benefit, a claimant must have paid Class 1 and/or Class 2 National Insurance contributions on earnings equivalent to 25 times the lower earnings limit in any tax year prior to the benefit claim year and have Class 1 and/or Class 2 NICs and/or NI Credits equivalent to 50 times the lower earnings limit (LEL) in each of the two previous tax years prior to the benefit claim year.

3. Latest information relates to the benefit year 1997 for which the latest relevant tax year is 1995/96.

Sources:

1. DSS: Lifetime Labour Market Database which contains a 1 per cent. sample from the National Insurance Recording System (NIRS) taken at February 1997.

2. Family Resources Survey for the estimate of employees who are earning below the lower earnings limit.

Contributions Agency (Computer)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security on what date the Contributions Agency computer system for the self-employed became inoperable. [64447]

Mr. Timms: The Contributions Agency National Insurance Recording System (NIRS2) is designed to hold over 65 million individual contribution records, calculate contributory benefits, provide data to many other Government Agencies. It also pays age-related contribution rebates to Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes in respect of individual scheme members and collects National Insurance Contributions from both the employed and the self-employed. To date, over £300 million has been collected from the self-employed through the monthly direct debit facility and the quarterly collection method.

Since its introduction on the 13 July 1998, the NIRS2 system has never become inoperable. Some facilities within the system have not yet been fully implemented.

Redundancy (Access to Benefits)

Liz Blackman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) if he will implement a clawback mechanism so that ex-employees from businesses which have gone into liquidation have access from the date of their redundancy to jobseeker's allowance and other benefits; [64518]

(2) if he will ensure that ex-employees of a firm going into receivership are able to receive jobseeker's allowance and other payments from the date of their redundancy while they await their claim for redundancy payment and compensatory payment in lieu of notice to be processed, with the introduction of a clawback mechanism, if appropriate. [64565]

Angela Eagle: We are aware that, under existing rules, if money is owed from an insolvent employer, full benefit cannot always be paid immediately to ex-employees claiming Jobseeker's Allowance or Income Support, although payments can be made to avoid hardship.

Since this problem came to our attention, we have been working to simplify the complex legislation in this area and we are currently considering proposals for changes to the relevant benefit rules.

Entitlement to the other income-related benefits (Family Credit, Disability Working Allowance, Housing Benefit and Council Tax Benefit) is not affected by unpaid earnings when an employer goes into liquidation.

Contributions Agency (Computer)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many amendments to the records of the self-employed have not been entered on the computer of the Contributions Agency; and what action is being taken to compensate those whose benefits have not been paid as a result. [64444]

Mr. Timms: There are currently 1,038,729 amendments as at the 6 December requiring input to the Contributions Agency National Insurance Recording System (NIRS2). Although an exact figure is not known, the number of cases affected by the delayed input of these amendments is a very small percentage of the overall total. This is because this figure is made up of varying types of amendments, many of which could never affect a claim to benefit.

If an individual benefit claim is affected, compensation will be considered under the normal rules of the Departmental Compensation Scheme. Details of the rules were provided in my Written Answer to hon. Member for Newbury (Mr. Rendel) on the 5 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *647–48*.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security how many applications for maternity benefit from the self-employed are *(a)* outstanding and *(b)* have been paid late as a result of the failure of the Contributions Agency computer system. [64446]

Mr. Timms: The estimated number of applications for maternity benefit from the self-employed, which are outstanding for November 1998, is 830. This is 60 more than the estimated figure for November 1997. The number that have been paid late because of delays attributable to the NIRS2 system is not available as information for the reason for any delay in payment is not recorded.

Source:

Central Data Unit and Analytical Services Division.

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security when the details relating to Mrs. Talat Robjant will be entered on the Contributions Agency computer system. [64445]

Mr. Timms: The Contributions Agency is able to use the new National Insurance Recording system (NIRS2) to answer all inquiries concerning information held on individual National Insurance Accounts. The NIRS2 facilities for registering National Insurance numbers and issuing National Insurance cards for both adults and juveniles are being piloted currently, and should be implemented nationally in the near future.

I will respond to the hon. Member with further information about this case, if he will write with further details.

Child Support Agency

Mr. Healey: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) how many men who have made maintenance payments through the CSA have requested a reimbursement following a DNA test that proved they were not the biological father; and in how many of these cases the payments have been reimbursed; [64465]

(2) what plans his Department has to review the guidelines in respect of reimbursement for men who have made maintenance payments and subsequently been proved, following a DNA test, not to be the biological father; [64467]

(3) how many men who have made maintenance payments under the court order system have requested a reimbursement following a DNA test that proved they were not the biological father; and in how many of these cases the payments have been reimbursed. [64466]

Angela Eagle: Neither the Child Support Agency nor the Court Services Agency routinely collect statistics on the number of fathers who have requested or received a reimbursement of child maintenance following a DNA test that indicated they were not the father. However, the

Child Support Agency estimates that there have been 74 cases where a child support assessment has been cancelled by the Agency because the non-resident parent has subsequently been determined not to be the father of the qualifying child.

The outcome of the consultation process on the Green Paper "Children First: a new approach to child support", together with our detailed proposals for reforming the Child Support System, will be announced in due course.

Terminally Ill People (Special Benefit Rules)

Mr. Chope: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will amend the advice given to doctors on when to make a report on form DS1500 so that they can take the initiative in informing patients or their representatives of the special benefit rules for the terminally ill. [64305]

Mr. Timms: Each pad of DS1500 forms already contains a set of guidance notes for the doctors who will complete the forms. This sets out the purpose of the form and the circumstances in which it should be used. In addition, a Bulletin was issued by the Department's Chief Medical Adviser in March 1997 to all general practitioners which explained the special rules for Disability Living Allowance for those people suffering from a terminal illness. This also explained the purpose of this form and the general practitioner's role in the process.

Consequently, we believe that sufficient guidance is already available to enable doctors to fulfil their part in this important benefit for a particularly vulnerable group of claimants. We have no reason to believe that the system is not working in the way in which it was intended.

Carers

Mrs. Fyfe: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate how many carers would benefit and at what cost if the rules of invalid care allowance were changed to include carers who were providing a total of at least 35 hours care per week to one or more individuals who were in receipt of the relevant levels and types of benefit. [64410]

Mr. Timms: The information is not available. Invalid Care Allowance has no regard to the number of people being cared for save that at least one severely disabled person must benefit from a minimum of 35 hours care per week.

Council Tax Benefit

Mr. Coleman: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security (1) when he plans to make a statement on how many council tax benefit claimants have been affected by the introduction of the Council Tax Benefit Regulations; [64692]

(2) when he will publish his review of the introduction of the new Council Tax Benefit Regulations. [64693]

Angela Eagle: Council Tax Benefit was restricted to band E levels from 1 April 1998 for properties in bands F, G or H. The Government are committed to monitoring the effects of the restriction in partnership with local authorities. We are examining the most efficient way of collecting information as the rule beds in: all existing claimants at the point of change were unaffected by it. We are seeking to minimise the administrative burden on local authorities. To this end officials have discussed options with local authority staff. Subject to the co-operation of local authorities, we propose to commission research in 1999. This research will be published in due course.

Children (Household Profile)

Mr. MacShane: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will estimate *(a)* how many children are living in households which have below half average income and *(b)* how many children live in households headed by (i) a married couple, (ii) a cohabiting couple and (iii) a lone parent; and if he will break down the figures between (A) two working parents, (B) one working parent and (C) no working parent families. [64673]

Angela Eagle: The information is in the tables.

The estimated total numbers of children living in households below half average income for the financial year 1996–97 in Great Britain

million

	Number of children
Before housing costs (BHC) measure of income	3.3
After housing costs (AHC) measure of income	4.5

Number of children living in households with below half average income by family type and economic status of parents

million

	Couples		
1996–97	*Married*	*Co-habiting*	*Lone parents*
Before housing costs (BHC)			
2 working parents	0.3	[1]—	0.0
1 working parent	0.8	[1]—	0.0
0 working parents	0.7	[1]—	1.2
Total	1.8	0.3	1.2
After housing costs (AHC)			
2 working parents	0.4	[1]—	0.0
1 working parent	1.0	[1]—	0.0
0 working parents	0.8	[1]—	1.9
Total	2.2	0.4	1.9

[1] The figures for co-habiting couples are not shown because their respective sample sizes are too small to provide robust figures at the required level of detail. However, approximately half of the children belonging to all such couples live in households with at least one working parent

Note:

All figures are estimates taken from the Households Below Average Income (HBAI) data set based on the Family Resources Survey (FRS)

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63918]

Mr. Timms: The information is in the table.

Total spend for year 1997–98

£

Business unit	Public opinion research	TV, radio and newspaper advertising	Direct mail
Benefits Agency	12,587	151,539	76,603
Contributions Agency	—	360,734	735,217
Child Support Agency	—	—	10,000
War Pensions Agency	2,747	1,857	900
HQ	518,735	1,146,806	74,911

Estimated spend for the year 1998–99

£

Business unit	Public opinion research	TV, radio and newspaper advertising	Direct mail
Benefits Agency	[1]83,703	276,757	44,321
Contributions Agency	25,442	1,000	164,200
Child Support Agency	—	—	21,000
War Pensions Agency	—	1,400	2,300
HQ	620,060	2,806,660	322,691

[1] The substantial increase in Research costs over 1997–98 can be attributed to Project Access (a review of Benefits Agency information, which included consultation and research exercises) and the costs of commissioning research prior to the launch of the new style leaflets and claim forms.

Married Woman's Pension

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list in respect of each financial year since 1990 *(a)* the level of the married woman's retirement pension, *(b)* the level of that pension if upratings had been rounded to the nearest one pence and *(c)* his estimate of the net effect on public funds in each financial year if upratings had been carried out as in (b). [64140]

Mr. Denham: Information is not available in form requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

It is not possible to provide an accurate estimate of means-tested benefit offsets. However, if all Basic State Pension rates were increased by 1p the magnitude of the change in expenditure on means-tested benefits would be around 28 per cent. of the increased expenditure on RP.

Year	Actual rate (£)	Rate if rounded to nearest 1p since 1990–1991 (£)	Gross RP cost of change in rounding convention (£ million) in 1998–1999 benefit rates
1990–91	28.20	28.20	0
1991–92	31.25	31.27	3
1992–93	32.55	32.55	0
1993–94	33.70	33.72	2
1994–95	34.50	34.53	4
1995–96	35.25	35.29	5
1996–97	36.60	36.67	8
1997–98	37.35	37.44	11

Notes:

1. Contributory benefits effects have been estimated by the Government Actuary's Department. Individuals who receive a combination of Category A and B pension are included in this estimate.

2. The above costings do not take into account any corresponding effects on linked benefits.

Pensions

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list in respect of each financial year since 1990 *(a)* the level of the basic retirement pension, *(b)* the level of that pension if upratings had been rounded to the nearest one pence and *(c)* his estimate of the net effect on public funds in each financial year if upratings had been carried out as in (b). [64141]

Mr. Denham: Information is not available in the form requested. Such information as is available is in the table.

It is not possible to provide an accurate estimate of means-tested benefit offsets for separate categories of pension. However, if all Basic State Pension rates were increased by 1p, the magnitude of the change in expenditure on means-tested benefits would be around 28 per cent. of the increased expenditure on Retirement Pension.

Year	Actual rate (£)	Rate if rounded to nearest 1p since 1990–91 (£)	Gross RP cost of change in rounding convention (£ million) in 1998–99 benefit rates
1990–91	46.90	46.90	0
1991–92	52.00	52.01	5
1992–93	54.15	54.14	−5
1993–94	56.10	56.09	−4
1994–95	57.60	57.60	0
1995–96	58.85	58.87	8
1996–97	61.15	61.17	8
1997–98	62.45	62.45	0

Notes:

1. Contributory benefits effects have been estimated by the Government Actuary's Department. Individuals who receive a combination of Category A and B pension are not included in this estimate.

2. Estimates are rounded to the nearest £1m. (+) denotes a cost and (−) denotes a saving.

3. These costings do not take into account any corresponding effects on linked benefits.

Departmental Staff

Mr. Robert Jackson: To ask the Secretary of State for Social Security if he will list *(a)* the (i) task forces, (ii) review panels and (iii) advisory groups his Department has, *(b)* the remit of each and *(c)* the members of each together with their principal employment and their level of remuneration. [62815]

Mr. Denham: The information has been placed in the Library.

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH AFFAIRS

Relay Europe

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the resources available *(a)* from Her Majesty's Government and *(b)* from the European Communities to Relay Europe; what is the intended audience for its services and the scale of its activities; what contribution his Department makes

to the subject matter distributed; if he will deposit in the Library a copy of the videos distributed; and if he will make a statement. [64126]

Mr. Fatchett: Relay Europe is a private sector organisation employed by the European Commission's Representation in the UK to organise conferences on its behalf, operate its mobile information centre and lend out audiovisual material produced by the Commission to the general public on demand. HMG make no direct financial contribution to Relay Europe. It does not carry any material produced by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

Departmental Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in his Department since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising and *(c)* direct mail. [63922]

Mr. Fatchett: Since May 1997 the Foreign and Commonwealth Office has spent, from centrally held funds: *(a)* £52,623.67 on public opinion research in Pakistan, the Eastern Caribbean and on British attitudes towards the EU; *(b)* £464,628.08 on advertising in newspapers and specialist publications for recruitment campaigns; and *(c)* nothing on direct mail. This gives a total expenditure on these activities of £517,215.75. It would involve disproportionate costs to establish what individual FCO posts may have spent on these activities from their devolved budgets.

Kuwaiti Missing Persons

Mr. David Atkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will estimate how many Kuwaiti *(a)* missing persons and *(b)* prisoners of war remain in Iraq following the Gulf War; and if he will make a statement on progress on their return, or the return of their remains where appropriate, listing the action taken by (i) Her Majesty's Government and (ii) other Governments. [64399]

Mr. Fatchett: Under UN Security Council resolution 687 Iraq is obliged to facilitate the repatriation of the 600 or more Kuwaitis missing since the Gulf War. The UK attends meetings of the Technical Sub-Committee in Kuwait and of the Tripartite Commission in Geneva, chaired by the International Committee of the Red Cross, with the aim of resolving these cases. Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the US, and France are also represented. Progress in these meetings has been hampered by continued Iraqi obstruction. To date, Iraq has only provided sufficient information to close three of the outstanding files.

Argentina

Mr. Ben Chapman: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what changes have been made to arrangements for the control of exports of arms and military equipment to Argentina. [64966]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Since 3 April 1982 the UK has maintained a national arms embargo on Argentina. It has been the policy of the UK to deny all applications for licences to export goods specified in Part III of Schedule I to the Export of Goods (Control) Order 1994, commonly known as the Military List. We have decided to replace this embargo with new arrangements, with immediate effect.

Licences will only be granted for exports that we are satisfied would not, now or in the foreseeable future, put at risk the security of our Overseas Territories in the South Atlantic or our forces operating there. We will assess all applications for licences to export goods to Argentina on a case-by-case basis against our national export licensing criteria and those in the EU Code of Conduct on Arms Exports. This will also be the case with applications for advance approvals for promotion prior to formal application for an export licence.

Russia

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what assessment he has made of the optimum mechanisms for multi-lateral environment projects, with particular reference to Finnish-Norwegian-USA-UK help to the Murmansk Region and Kola peninsula areas of the USSR, in respect of stabilising and rectifying armamental legacies of the Cold War. [63109]

Mr. Fatchett: We are concerned about the environmental threat from the nuclear waste from nuclear powered vessels in North West Russia, and welcomes all initiatives which address the issue. The size of the problem is such that a multilateral approach offers the best chance of making an impact. The Government are working with international partners on tackling the problem, for example helping the Russian nuclear regulators with technical expertise to license waste storage casks. We also organised a seminar on 3 December to bring together all the interested parties, from Russia and other countries, from across Whitehall, and from British industry, to discuss the way forward.

Mr. Dalyell: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will take steps to assist the UK nuclear industry to expand its bilateral funding to cover nuclear waste management and decommissioning in the Russian Federation. [63108]

Mr. Fatchett: We have already taken steps to promote what British industry can offer in nuclear waste management by holding a seminar on nuclear waste on 3 December, focusing on North-West Russia and the Urals. The seminar was attended by the relevant Russian authorities, other Whitehall Departments, representatives from the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the European Commission and international partners as well as a specialist cross-section of British industry. It looked at how to take forward nuclear environmental clean-up, an area where the experience and expertise of the UK nuclear industry has much to offer.

General Pinochet

Mr. Howard: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will make a statement on reports that the British Embassy in Madrid warned the Embassy of Chile in Madrid that Spain would be likely to apply for the extradition of General Pinochet if he travelled to the United Kingdom; when such warnings were given; and in what terms. [64322]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: No such warning was passed to the Embassy of Chile in Madrid.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the contacts which took place between his Department and the Embassy of Chile about the security of Senator Pinochet during his visit to Britain in the autumn. [64330]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: There were no contacts between this Department and the Chilean Embassy about the security of Senator Pinochet prior to the Senator's arrest on 16 October.

Mr. Wilkinson: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what response his Department made to the request made in September to the British Embassy in Chile for Senator Pinochet to travel to the United Kingdom as an Ambassador by presidential decree on a special mission to the United Kingdom. [64332]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: When the Embassy in Santiago was told informally in early September about the possibility of a visit by Senator Pinochet, no mention was made of any presidential decree or special mission.

Chechnya

Mr. Robathan: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs which of the Britons killed in Chechnya on 8 December were or had been employed by the British Government. [64319]

Mr. Tony Lloyd: Of the three Britons murdered in Chechnya, Mr. Rudolf Petschi had been employed by the British Government. Mr. Petschi served with the Royal Signals in the British Army from February 1976 to January 1998.

Kenya and Tanzania

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs what discussions his Department has had with the Governments of Kenya and Tanzania on providing assistance to them following the recent bomb attacks. [64293]

Mr. Foulkes: I have been asked to reply.

Discussions with the Kenyan Government began immediately following the 7 August bomb explosion in Nairobi. This Department has provided £2.526 million in emergency assistance, including £1.5 million worth of information technology and communications equipment for the Kenya National Examinations Council and similar equipment worth £1 million for the Co-operative Bank, the head offices of both organisations having been devastated by the bomb. Other assistance included visits by plastic surgeons and structural engineers.

The bomb in Dar es Salaam resulted in much less loss of life, injuries and damage than Nairobi. The Prime Minister wrote to President Mkapa on 8 August offering assistance, but no request was received.

Schengen Agreement

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs if he will list the acquis of the Schengen agreement that has not been deposited in the Library. [64189]

Kate Hoey: I have been asked to reply.

The Schengen acquis will not be defined definitively until the Amsterdam Treaty enters into force, at which point the Council of Ministers will be invited to adopt two Decisions defining the acquis and allocating a European Union legal base to each Schengen measure. Draft versions of these Decisions, with Explanatory Memoranda, were submitted to the House and copied to the Library on 21 May 1998. Of course, the acquis will continue to grow as the Schengen Executive Committee will continue to adopt instruments right up to the entry into force of Amsterdam.

The Government have also placed in the Library copies of the 1985 Schengen Agreement, the 1990 Schengen Convention and the Accession Protocols and all the Decisions and Declarations of the Schengen Executive Committee covering the period up to and including June 1997 which are in our possession, except for six documents which are classified as "Confidential". Some of these documents are incomplete and there are others which we have not yet received: these are indicated in the list which accompanies the documents deposited in the Library. We are endeavouring to obtain the missing documents and hope to deposit a further set of texts up to and including measures adopted in the first half of 1998 in the Library in the New Year.

LORD CHANCELLOR'S DEPARTMENT

DNA Testing (Paternity Cases)

Mr. Healey: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department how many men who were designated the father and subject to a maintenance court order have been subsequently proven not be the father by DNA testing. [64408]

Mr. Hoon: This information is not collected.

Cabinet Office Expenditure

Mr. Don Foster: To ask the Minister of State, Lord Chancellor's Department what has been the total expenditure and the breakdown of expenditure in the Cabinet Office since May 1997 on *(a)* public opinion research, *(b)* television, radio and newspaper advertising, *(c)* direct mail and *(d)* publicity. [64185]

Mr. Hoon: To date the expenditure under these headings has been:

(a) nil

(b) £293,091.44, all of which related to judicial appointments and the recruitment of staff.

(c) nil

(d) £182,263, broken down as follows:

	£
Domestic Violence leaflets/booklets/posters	62,646
"Who Decides?" Green Paper	32,292
Marriage Support Services Directory	23,157
You too could be a Magistrate—reprint	3,792
Working for Justice—guide to LCD	36,120
Civil justice Consultation Paper	17,396
Judicial Appointments application forms—reprint	6,860
Total	182,263

HOME DEPARTMENT

Criminal Trials

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the Government's response to the recommendations of the Law Commission report No. 245: Evidence in Criminal Proceedings: Hearsay and Related Topics; and if he will make a statement. [64785]

Mr. Straw: The Government consider the Law Commission's report No. 245, published in June 1997, a thorough and comprehensive review of the law on hearsay evidence. It contains 50 recommendations and a draft bill which are intended to modernise and codify the law.

The Government have given careful consideration to the recommendations in the report, in consultation with the Law Commission. They have concluded that the proposals will simplify the law and enable more evidence to be deemed admissible, whilst maintaining proper safeguards to protect the interests of the defendant.

The Government have decided to accept all the recommendations in the report.

Mr. Mackinlay: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will seek powers to allow a judge discretion not to abandon criminal trials where a defendant's criminal record is revealed, prior to verdict, by a co-defendant or witness; and if he will make a statement. [63022]

Mr. Boateng: The law on previous misconduct, which includes the admissibility in criminal proceedings of a defendant's criminal record, is currently under consideration by the Law Commission. The Law Commission issued a consultation paper on this subject in July 1996 and we will await their final report, which is expected next year, before reaching a decision on this matter.

Terrorism Legislation

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he will publish his proposals for non-temporary UK-wide legislation against terrorism. [64784]

Mr. Straw: I have today published, jointly with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, a consultation document containing proposals to replace the current temporary framework of legislation against terrorism with permanent United Kingdom-wide provisions.

The document sets out the Government's proposals for police powers and other measures which would apply throughout the United Kingdom to deal with the threat from all forms of terrorism, including those which might develop in the future. The proposals take proper account of the peace process and the security situation in Northern Ireland. They also introduce measures to combat domestic terrorism and strengthen our response to the continuing threat from international terrorism.

The proposals in the consultation document are designed to be both effective and proportionate in responding to terrorism whilst ensuring that individual rights are protected and that the United Kingdom's international commitments are fulfilled.

Views are invited on all of the proposals discussed in the document, and the consultation period will last until 16 March 1999. Following this, proposals will be drawn up for new counter-terrorist legislation, to be introduced at a suitable opportunity.

Immigration and Asylum

Mr. Bradshaw: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many comments he has received on the White Paper on immigration and asylum; and if he will publish them. [64783]

Mr. Straw: 334 comments have been received on the White Paper 'Fairer, Faster and Firmer—A Modern Approach to Immigration and Asylum'. A list of those who commented together with copies of their comments, with the exception of six whose authors requested that they should not be published, have been placed in the Library.

Mr. Clappison: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, pursuant to his answer of 8 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *107–08*, what plans he has to require courts to notify the Immigration and Nationality Directorate when someone subject to immigration control is convicted of an offence resulting in a sentence of *(a)* imprisonment of less than 12 months and *(b)* a community service order. [64688]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: Asylum seekers who declare their application in-country may be eligible for support under the terms of the National Assistance Act 1948 or the Children Act 1989. In both cases, this support is provided by local authority social services departments. It is for the local authorities concerned to decide how best to discharge their responsibilities. Under current legislation, the Home Office has no role in those decisions.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds, North-East (Mr. Best) has written to me about this matter and I will be replying to him shortly.

Mutual Legal Assistance

Mr. Baker: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on the Government's policy towards the proposals discussed at the recent meeting in Brussels of the European Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in respect of the interception of communications. [64470]

Mr. Straw: The Government's policy towards co-operation between member states of the European Union on interception of communications remains as reported to the House of Lords Select Committee on the European Communities and recorded in their Report Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters (14th Report,

Session 1997–98). Justice and Home Affairs Ministers meeting in Brussels on 3 and 4 December addressed a number of questions relating to the latest text of the draft Convention. We have reached agreement on much of the interception provisions. We are now seeking to ensure that the text accommodates important features of our own interception law and policy as well as that of other member states. In particular, differences in national legislation should not have the effect that operations carried out in relation to the United Kingdom's security and intelligence agencies would fall within the scope of the Convention when it will clearly not apply in relation to their equivalents in other member states. The Government's position on the latest text is under consideration by the European Scrutiny Committees.

Charity Commission

Mr. Chaytor: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to increase the accountability of the Charity Commission. [64560]

Mr. Boateng: I refer my hon. Friend to my answer of 15 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *466*.

Police Dog Training

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what animal welfare organisations have been asked to advise police forces in the United Kingdom as to the training procedures that should be followed in police dog training; and if he will make a statement. [64521]

Mr. Boateng: Guidance on the training of police dogs is contained in the Police Dog Training and Care Manual which was issued in 1996 by the Home Office Standing Advisory Committee on Police Dogs. The revision of the Manual is now the responsibility of the Association of Chief Police Officers' (ACPO) Police Dog Sub-Committee.

The Chairman of the ACPO Police Dog Sub-Committee, Mrs. Pauline Clare, has contacted Essex Police, the RSPCA, the National Canine Defence League, and Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary with a view to developing a scheme for inspection of force dog training centres by a team comprising of representatives of these organisations and the ACPO Sub-Committee. A pilot scheme is to be initiated within Essex involving inspection by two members of the Sub-Committee, a representative of the RSPCA, and a member of the Essex Police Authority. The ACPO Police Dog Sub-Committee will evaluate the pilot scheme in due course.

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what discussions he has had with police authorities in the United Kingdom on the training of police dogs, with particular reference to measures to ensure that no cruelty takes place during training; and if he will make a statement. [64527]

Mr. Boateng: My right hon. Friend has not discussed this matter with police authorities and has no plans to do so.

Guidance on the training of police dogs is contained in the Police Dog Training and Care Manual which specifically states that a dog handler should never resort to physical punishment in training the dog. Revision of the Manual is the responsibility of the Association of Chief Police Officers' Police Dog Sub-Committee.

Prisoners (Education Programmes)

Mr. Jim Cunningham: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what assessment he has made of the effect on prison inmates of the education programmes provided; and what estimate he has made of the re-offending rate of former inmates who have done well on the courses. [64478]

Mr. George Howarth: Information on the re-offending rate of former inmates who have done well on courses is not available.

A pilot study on the effectiveness of regimes was undertaken by the Prison Service in 1995–96. This showed that participation on educational/vocational courses reduced the rates of re-conviction provided that they were undertaken by offenders who had a need in that area. The study showed that education may lead to improved attitudes in respect of criminal lifestyle with the offender developing a new perspective on his or her behaviour.

Education and work programmes in prisons are increasingly being offered as an integrated package with priority given to improving basic skills. As specific basic educational standards are a pre-requisite to obtaining employment after release, these programmes are seen as potentially extremely valuable to offenders when they are seeking employment.

Prisons (Needle Exchanges)

Mr. Flynn: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is his present policy on introducing needle exchanges in prisons. [64318]

Mr. George Howarth: We have no present plans to introduce a needle exchange scheme in prisons in England and Wales. The arguments in favour are counter-balanced by the risk of increasing the number of needles in circulation and undermining the need to deter and prevent drug misuse. The Prison Service, however, continues to monitor developments in the field, both at home and abroad.

Police Service

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if it is his policy to increase the strength of the police service; and if he will make a statement; [64405]

(2) if he will set out the strengths of each individual police force in England and Wales on *(a)* 1 May 1979, *(b)* 1 May 1997 and *(c)* the latest available date in 1998; and if he will make a statement; [64328]

(3) what arrangements he has made for collecting up-to-date figures on the strengths of individual police forces; at what frequency such information is required; and if he will make a statement; [64325]

(4) what assessment he has made of the impact of the financial settlement for the police on the strength of the police service; and if he will make a statement. [64327]

Mr. Boateng: Information about police personnel numbers for individual forces in England and Wales is collected twice a year, at the end of March and September. Copies of the collated information are usually placed in the Library. Additionally, Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary collects annually more detailed information on police personnel numbers and their deployment.

The Government will do all that they can to ensure that the police have adequate resources to play their key part in tackling crime and disorder. However, no responsible Government can give commitments about numbers of police officers. Under legislation passed by the previous Government, this is a matter for chief constables, within the resources made available to them. The additional resources to be provided by the Government, totalling up to £1,24 billion over the next three years, coupled with the two per cent. efficiency targets which have been set for police authorities, will help to release more resources for front line policing.

The table provides information on police numbers at 31 March 1979, 31 March 1997 and 30 September 1998. The figures for 30 September 1998 are provisional and subject to validation.

Police forces numbers—England and Wales

Force	*31 March 1979*	*31 March 1997*	*30 September [1]1998*
Avon & Somerset	2,825	2,988.8	2,965.8
Bedfordshire	902	1,093.6	1,050.9
Cambridgeshire	1,064	1,302.0	1,285.9
Cheshire	1,778	2,045.5	2,054.9
City of London	829	858.9	792.5
Cleveland	1,334	1,459.3	1,453.2
Cumbria	1,056	1,143.5	1,153.0
Derbyshire	1,563	1,790.6	1,768.5
Devon & Cornwall	2,660	2,864.5	2,918.1
Dorset	1,128	1,284.0	1,292.7
Durham	1,312	1,460.5	1,559.1
Dyfed-Powys	910	1,004.5	1,013.3
Essex	2,461	2,960.7	2,903.1
Gloucestershire	1,076	1,132.6	1,090.9
Greater Manchester	6,419	6,921.6	6,890.2
Gwent	965	1,243.0	1,254.3
Hampshire	2,949	3,451.7	3,489.9
Hertfordshire	1,462	1,759.1	1,706.4
Humberside	1,849	2,045.0	2,003.4
Kent	2,724	3,260.1	3,200.2
Lancashire	3,097	3,247.5	3,245.1
Leicestershire	1,701	1,948.8	1,974.5
Lincolnshire	1,171	1,196.4	1,159.2
Merseyside	4,427	4,230.4	4,270.4
Metropolitan Police	22,214	26,677.3	26,106.3
Norfolk	1,223	1,431.6	1,409.6
North Wales	1,268	1,369.0	1,395.0
North Yorkshire	1,342	1,337.6	1,359.8
Northamptonshire	905	1,176.7	1,162.3
Northumbria	3,272	3,676.8	3,802.0
Nottinghamshire	2,117	2,323.4	2,269.0
South Wales	2,936	2,975.9	2,945.6
South Yorkshire	2,546	3,158.7	3,170.6
Staffordshire	1,978	2,211.1	2,271.1
Suffolk	1,064	1,179.7	1,179.7
Surrey	1,440	1,619.5	1,614.7
Sussex	2,758	3,084.9	2,923.9
Thames Valley	2,639	3,695.0	3,789.6
Warwickshire	841	925.9	923.5
West Mercia	1,743	2,040.2	2,024.2
West Midlands	5,981	7,112.7	7,215.3
West Yorkshire	4,727	5,208.8	5,065.7
Wiltshire	997	1,154.3	1,147.8
Total	109,653	125,051.3	124,271.1

[1] Police numbers for 30 September 1998 are provisional

Asylum Seekers

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many applications for political asylum have been made to date in 1998; how many were made in the same period in 1997; and if he will make a statement. [64326]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The numbers of applications for asylum from January to October 1998 was 36,625 as compared to 27,035 in the same period in 1997. The rate of applications has varied widely over recent years.

There was a temporary fall in the number of asylum seekers after the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act 1993 and numbers then peaked again in 1995. It may be that we are seeing a similar pattern after the Asylum and Immigration Act.

The current legislative base is inadequate and the asylum system which this Government inherited has been described as shambolic. We set out our proposals for a firmer, faster and fairer system in our White Paper in July. Legislation will be forthcoming shortly to implement these proposals.

Sir Norman Fowler: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what steps he has taken to ensure that all those applicants for political asylum given indefinite leave to remain in this country are genuine political refugees; and if he will make a statement; [64324]

(2) in what circumstances applicants for political asylum who are judged not to be genuine may be given indefinite leave to remain in the country; and if he will make a statement. [64323]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: A person who applies for asylum may, even if unsuccessful, qualify for leave to enter or remain on other grounds either under the Immigration Rules or an exceptional compelling or compassionate basis, and Secretaries of State in successive Governments have dealt with cases accordingly. For example, in the first quarter of 1993, 57 per cent. of asylum applicants whose cases were decided were not granted asylum but were granted leave to enter or remain on exceptional grounds with an avenue to settlement in due course.

Dr. Cable: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what standards he has specified for the accommodation of asylum seekers; and if he will make a statement. [63934]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The Home Office is not currently responsible for accommodating asylum seekers and, therefore, has made no specification for their accommodation. Asylum seekers who are able to support themselves or those who qualify for income support and housing benefit can choose their own accommodation. Others may qualify for support provided by local authority social services departments under the terms of the National Assistance Act 1948 or the Children Act 1989.

The White Paper "Fairer, faster and firmer—a modern approach to immigration and asylum" (Cm 4018) set out proposals for a new asylum seekers support scheme. This scheme (which will require statutory underpinning), will be included in the forthcoming Immigration and Asylum Bill. It is not expected to become operational until April 2000. A project team has been set up to take forward the proposals. They will be developing specifications for the support arrangements, including accommodation, but no firm proposals have yet been developed.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many citizens of the former Yugoslavia have sought political asylum in the UK in the last three months; how many applications have been accepted; and what were the equivalent figures for each of the last three years. [64257]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The information requested is given in the table.

Applications[1] received for asylum in the United Kingdom, excluding dependants, and initial decisions on applications, August to October 1995, 1996, 1997 and 1998 for nationals of the former Yugoslavia

	Applications	Total decisions	Decisions[2] Grants of asylum	Grants of ELR	Total refusals
August to October 1995	485	355	80	55	215
August to October 1996	270	590	275	125	190
August to October 1997[3]	725	715	430	150	140
August to October 1998[3]	3,065	385	160	5	220

[1] Figures rounded to the nearest 5
[2] Decisions may not relate to applications lodged in the same period
[3] Provisional figures

Sir Peter Emery: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons were granted political asylum in the years *(a)* 1970 to 1979, *(b)* 1980 to 1989 and *(c)* 1990 to date. [64235]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: In the period January 1990 to October 1998, a total of 17,780 persons were recognised as refugees and granted asylum in the United Kingdom under the criteria set out in the 1951 United National Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. This figure excludes dependants and subsequent decisions following appeal or further representations.

Figures on the numbers of persons granted asylum in the United Kingdom are only separately identifiable from 1984 onward. Between January 1984 and December 1989, 4,480 persons were granted asylum in the United Kingdom.

I regret that corresponding data for 1970 to 1983 are not available. However, data on recognised refugees accepted for settlement in 1974 to 1987 after four years residence in the United Kingdom show 2,600 such persons in 1974 to 1983 and 3,000 in 1984 to 1987.

Prisons (Bullying)

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many reported cases of bullying of prison inmates by fellow inmates there have been in England and Wales in each of the last three years. [64122]

Mr. George Howarth: The number of reported cases of bullying of prisoners by other prisoners is not recorded centrally. Establishments are not specifically required to maintain statistics on the number of cases identified, nor to report them to Prison Service headquarters. However, the Prison Service intends to make it a requirement for establishments to monitor the number of prisoners identified as being bullies on a monthly basis in the coming.

Mr. Barry Horne

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what advice he received in respect of Mr. Barry Horne before Mr. Horne was transferred from Full Sutton Prison to York District Hospital on 24 November. [64448]

Mr. George Howarth: Mr. Horne was transferred to York District Hospital on 24 November on clinical grounds following an assessment of his medical condition by a consultant from that hospital.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what further advice he received about Mr. Barry Horne's medical condition prior to his readmission to York District Hospital on 13 December. [64458]

Mr. George Howarth: The decision to return Mr. Horne to York District Hospital was taken on clinical grounds by the senior medical officer at Full Sutton prison in consultation with consultants at the hospital, following Mr. Horne's decision to resume eating and to accept medical treatment.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what costs have been incurred by his Department as a result of the hunger strike recently undertaken by Mr. Barry Horne. [64450]

Mr. George Howarth: The direct costs to the Prison Service of Mr. Horne's recent hunger strike have been estimated to be approximately £1,000 for the hire of agency nurses while he was held in Prison.

Whilst Mr. Horne was located in hospital, the Prison Service provided three escort staff. However, there is no additional cost related to these staff, as additional hours accrued by them during this time will be taken off during less busy periods in the future.

Mr. Greenway: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what were the reasons for the transfer of Mr. Barry Horne back to Full Sutton Prison from York District Hospital on 10 December. [64459]

Mr. George Howarth: Mr. Horne was returned to Full Sutton Prison following a review of his condition by medical staff at York District Hospital. The review concluded that in view of his continued refusal of food and medical treatment, and his stable condition, there was no clinical need for him to remain at the hospital as he could be equally well cared for in the health care centre at Full Sutton Prison.

Juries

Mr. Heald: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if he will make a statement on his policy with regard to the use of juries in criminal trials. [63016]

Mr. Boateng: We have published two consultation papers this year about jury trials. The first paper, on use of juries in serious fraud trials, invited views on the principle of whether the system is likely to operate better and with a greater degree of public confidence if, in a small number of complex fraud trials, a traditional jury were to be replaced by another method of determining the facts. The consultation paper on determining the mode of trial considered whether defendants should be able to choose to be tried by a jury in cases which magistrates have indicated that they would be content to hear. We are currently considering the responses to these two consultation exercises.

General Pinochet

Mr. Gerald Howarth: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what has been the cost to public funds to date incurred in connection with the detention of Senator Pinochet; and if he will itemise those costs. [64264]

Mr. Straw: I refer the hon. Member to a reply I gave to the hon. Member for Poole, (Mr. Syms) on 9 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *47*.

Crime (Staffordshire)

Mr. Jenkins: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what recent representations he has received about the level of crime in Staffordshire. [64505]

Mr. Boateng: In addition to the two questions by my hon. Friend about crime in Staffordshire which I replied to on 16 November 1998, *Official Report*, columns *388–89*, and 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *734*, I have received a number of representations from members of the public.

In the 12 months to March 1998, police in Staffordshire recorded 89,820 offences. This represents a decrease of 3.1 per cent. (2,866 offences) over the previous 12 months.

Immigration Detainees

Fiona Mactaggart: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many people, at the most recent convenient date, were detained in *(a)* prisons and *(b)* immigration detention centres under Immigration Act, powers alone; and, of these, how many were detained (i) on arrival and (ii) after enforcement action. [64514]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will write to my hon. Friend.

Helicopter Flights

Dr. Tonge: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what plans he has to ban flights by police helicopters in London between the hours of 11 pm and 6 am [64540]

Mr. Boateng: I refer the hon. Member to the reply that I gave her on 19 November 1998, *Official Report*, column *735*.

Police Grant

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the real terms change in funding from central Government funds for each police force in the next financial year; what was the real terms change in funding from central Government funds for each police force between 1997–98 and 1998–99; and if he will make a statement. [63674]

Mr. Boateng: My right hon. Friend announced on 2 December 1998, *Official Report*, columns *194–97*, the revenue funding proposals for each police authority for 1999–2000. The table shows the real terms changes between these and comparative funding allocations in 1998–99, and between 1998–99 and 1997–98. In actual terms, the national increase in Total Standard Spending on the police is 2.67 per cent. or £186 million over 1998–99.

In addition, the Government have announced the abolition of crude and universal capping of local authority spending from April 1999. This will provide some flexibility at local level to enable police authorities to increase their spending power. Nevertheless, police authorities are expected to set budgets which are prudent and reasonable, and which do not impose an excessive increase in council tax next year.

Police funding 1997–98 to 1999–2000

	1997–98 £ million[1]	Percentage change (real terms)	1998–99 £ million[1]	Percentage change (real terms)	1999–2000 £ million[1]
Avon and Somerset	158.7	0.76	164.3	0.00	168.4
Bedfordshire	58.9	0.63	60.9	−1.64	61.4
Cambridgeshire	68.2	2.60	71.9	1.30	74.8
Cheshire	101.1	0.79	104.7	1.57	109
City of London[2]	61.6	−9.79	57.1	−5.34	55.4
Cleveland	75.2	4.05	80.4	−1.10	81.5
Cumbria	58.6	−2.01	59.0	−0.79	60
Derbyshire	95.3	−0.23	97.7	1.36	101.7
Devon and Cornwall	158.6	2.72	167.4	1.64	174.4
Dorset	66.6	−0.92	67.8	0.87	70.1
Durham	73.3	3.70	78.1	1.56	81.3
Dyfed Powys	49.9	−0.34	51.1	−1.68	51.5
Essex	155.9	−1.12	158.4	0.39	163
Gloucestershire	60.1	−0.41	61.5	−1.01	62.4
Greater Manchester	351.2	1.09	364.8	0.48	375.7
Gwent	64.5	1.55	67.3	0.46	69.3
Hampshire	180.0	2.24	189.1	0.40	194.6
Hertfordshire	92.4	−0.89	94.1	3.78	100.1
Humberside	105.9	1.64	110.6	−0.32	113
Kent	168.5	3.33	178.9	−0.09	183.2
Lancashire	167.7	1.50	174.9	−0.54	178.3
Leicestershire	97.3	−0.88	99.1	0.71	102.3
Lincolnshire	61.5	−3.94	60.7	1.90	63.4
Merseyside	227.3	−0.11	233.3	−1.18	236.3
Metropolitan Police[3]	1,688.0	−1.10	1,715.3	−0.80	1,744.1
Norfolk	78.1	0.81	80.9	0.70	83.5
North Wales	71.2	0.06	73.2	0.09	75.1
North Yorkshire	71.9	2.33	75.6	0.14	77.6
Northamptonshire	60.0	1.87	62.8	1.29	65.2
Northumbria	193.4	3.36	205.4	1.17	213
Nottinghamshire	119.3	0.34	123.0	0.26	126.4
South Wales	155.1	1.21	161.3	−1.35	163.1
South Yorkshire	158.8	1.37	165.4	1.04	171.3
Staffordshire	111.8	−3.29	111.1	−0.77	113
Suffolk	63.4	1.31	66.0	1.35	68.7
Surrey	91.8	−10.73	84.2	6.60	92
Sussex	155.2	1.96	162.6	−0.16	166.4
Thames Valley Police	208.2	2.51	219.3	−0.08	224.6
Warwickshire	50.6	−1.71	51.1	−0.72	52
West Mercia	106.3	0.71	110.0	0.31	113.1
West Midlands	353.4	2.42	371.9	−0.16	380.6
West Yorkshire	267.5	1.69	279.5	−0.07	286.3
Wiltshire	62.2	−0.80	63.4	−0.13	64.9

[1] Rounded to the nearest £100,000. The allocation is the sum of: Police Grant, Transitional grant, Police SSA, Capital Finance SSA, SSA Reduction Grant and Central Support Reduction Grant.

[2] Figure for the City includes Police SSA, Grant and SSA Reduction Grant, but excludes other SSAs (eg Capital Financing) and Central Support Reduction Grant. These are allocated to the Common Council of the City of London as a whole in respect of all its functions.

[3] Figure for the Metropolitan Police does not include funding allocated to the Receiver under the Environmental, Protective and Cultural Services SSA for school crossing patrols, Magistrates' Courts and the Probation Service. It does include its Special Payment.

Prisons (Drugs)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many drug free units there are in England and Wales; if he will list the prisons in which they operate; and if he will make a statement. [63670]

Mr. George Howarth: As part of the implementation of its Drug Strategy, the Prison Service is planning the expansion of provision of voluntary testing units from April 1999 onwards. Included in the programme of work is a specification for voluntary testing units and an analysis of the existing provision. The information requested will be available towards the end of this financial year.

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many cases of reported drug use there were in Prison Service establishments in England and Wales *(a)* in each of the last 12 months and *(b)* in each of the last five years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [63685]

Mr. George Howarth: Provisional information for 1998 showing the number of drugs offences by prisoners proved at prison adjudication are given in the table. In addition, 831 prison visitors were arrested for drug related incidents at a prison in England and Wales between January and September 1998. Figures for prison visitors arrested for drug offences for the last 5 years are shown in the table.

Information regarding the number of drugs offences proved at prison adjudication are published in "Prison statistics England and Wales" (table 8.5 of the 1997 edition, cm 4017) and before 1997 in successive volumes of "Statistics of offences against prison discipline and punishments England and Wales" (tables 8 and 9 for 1994–96 and tables 11 and 12 for 1992–93). Copies of these publications are in the Library.

Number of drugs offences proved at adjudication in prisons in England and Wales—January to September 1998

Offence	*Number*
Refusal to provide a drug test sample	326
Falsifying a drug test sample	35
Unauthorised use of controlled drug	11,902
Possession of unauthorised drug	2,402
Sells/delivers drugs to person	69
Total	14,734

Visitors to prisons arrested for drug related offences

Year	*Number*
1993	310
1994	921
1995	1,410
1996	1,270
1997	1,130
1998 (January-September)	831

Feltham Young Offenders Institution

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) how many people have been transferred from Feltham Young Offenders Institution needing psychiatric help as defined under the Mental Health Act 1983 in each of the last five years; and if he will make a statement; [63676]

(2) what is the average length of time taken for transfers to take place from Feltham Young Offenders Institution of individuals needing psychiatric help as defined under the Mental Health Act 1983; and if he will make a statement. [63783]

Mr. George Howarth: The following transfers from Feltham Young Offenders Institution to psychiatric hospital under sections 47 and 48 of the Mental Health Act 1983 took place in each of the years in question covering the period 1 April to 31 March:

	Number
1993–94	7
1994–95	16
1995–96	36
1996–97	30
1997–98	31

The time taken to deal with transfers is not available in the form requested. Each case is dealt with according to the conditions of the patient and the availability of a suitable hospital bed.

Police Manpower

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many police officers there were in each police force on (i) the last day for which figures are available, (ii) 31 March 1998, (iii) 30 September 1997, (iv) 31 March 1997 and (v) 31 March 1992; if he will give the figures in total and per head of population; and if he will make a statement. [63672]

Mr. Boateng: The latest available information is set out in the tables. Police strength figures as at 30 September 1998 are provisional and have yet to be validated.

The population figures are those provided by the Office for National Statistics. Information on the numbers of population per police officer is based on the population figures as at mid-June preceding the date of the police strength figures. For 30 September, the population figures used are those for mid 1997; mid 1998 figures will not be available until next year.

Total police force strength, by force area

Police force	31 March 1992	31 March 1997	30 September 1997	31 March 1998	30 September 1998
Avon & Somerset	3,080	2,989	2,973	2,976	2,966
Bedfordshire	1,082	1,094	1,081	1,079	1,051
Cambridgeshire	1,243	1,302	1,292	1,291	1,286
Cheshire	1,879	2,046	2,029	2,042	2,055
City of London	804	859	836	825	793
Cleveland	1,481	1,459	1,481	1,483	1,453
Cumbria	1,184	1,144	1,162	1,164	1,153
Derbyshire	1,690	1,791	1,757	1,772	1,769
Devon & Cornwall	2,887	2,865	2,910	2,962	2,918
Dorset	1,273	1,284	1,279	1,310	1,293
Durham	1,380	1,461	1,479	1,515	1,559
Dyfed-Powys	942	1,005	1,008	1,002	1,013
Essex	2,893	2,961	2,944	2,929	2,903
Gloucestershire	1,178	1,133	1,107	1,104	1,091
Greater Manchester	7,040	6,922	6,908	6,949	6,890
Gwent	1,005	1,243	1,229	1,233	1,254
Hampshire	3,197	3,452	3,481	3,490	3,490
Hertfordshire	1,694	1,759	1,738	1,740	1,706
Humberside	2,023	2,045	2,030	2,021	2,003
Kent	3,068	3,260	3,301	3,251	3,200
Lancashire	3,196	3,248	3,281	3,257	3,245
Leicestershire	1,843	1,949	1,958	1,983	1,975
Lincolnshire	1,199	1,196	1,189	1,191	1,159
Merseyside	4,612	4,230	4,223	4,216	4,270
Metropolitan Police	28,143	26,677	26,391	26,094	26,106
Norfolk	1,425	1,432	1,440	1,430	1,410
Northamptonshire	1,163	1,177	1,181	1,169	1,162
Northumbria	3,463	3,677	3,689	3,769	3,802
North Wales	1,352	1,369	1,371	1,396	1,395
North Yorkshire	1,391	1,338	1,383	1,367	1,360
Nottinghamshire	2,330	2,323	2,317	2,323	2,269
South Wales	3,156	2,976	2,990	2,986	2,946
South Yorkshire	3,012	3,159	3,158	3,182	3,171
Staffordshire	2,169	2,211	2,230	2,292	2,271
Suffolk	1,209	1,180	1,198	1,186	1,180
Surrey	1,703	1,620	1,608	1,608	1,615
Sussex	2,984	3,085	3,040	3,038	2,924
Thames Valley	3,742	3,695	3,705	3,776	3,790
Warwickshire	995	926	914	924	924
West Mercia	2,038	2,040	2,031	2,010	2,024
West Midlands	6,927	7,113	7,079	7,156	7,215
West Yorkshire	5,111	5,209	5,250	5,155	5,066
Wiltshire	1,216	1,154	1,167	1,156	1,148
England	118,947	118,459	118,218	118,181	117,663
Wales	6,455	6,592	6,597	6,617	6,608
E & W (excl. Met)	97,259	98,374	98,424	98,704	98,165
England & Wales	125,402	125,052	124,815	124,798	124,271

Head of population per police officer, by force area

Police force	31 March 1992	31 March 1997	30 September 1997	31 March 1998	30 September 1998
Avon & Somerset	465	491	497	497	498
Bedfordshire	494	502	511	512	526
Cambridgeshire	539	540	551	552	554
Cheshire	515	479	484	481	478
City of London	5	6	6	6	7
Cleveland	377	382	375	375	382
Cumbria	414	429	424	423	427
Derbyshire	556	537	550	545	546
Devon & Cornwall	525	539	533	524	432
Dorset	521	531	538	525	532
Durham	438	416	411	402	390
Dyfed-Powys	499	475	474	477	472
Essex	511	511	517	520	525
Gloucestershire	458	491	505	507	513
Greater Manchester	364	372	395	392	396
Gwent	445	447	453	452	444

Head of population per police officer, by force area

Police force	31 March 1992	31 March 1997	30 September 1997	31 March 1998	30 September 1998
Hampshire	533	508	506	505	505
Hertfordshire	498	491	501	501	511
Humberside	432	434	436	438	442
Kent	502	478	474	482	489
Lancashire	441	439	434	438	439
Leicestershire	483	476	475	468	471
Lincolnshire	495	515	521	520	534
Merseyside	312	336	298	299	295
Metropolitan Police	259	284	289	292	292
Norfolk	533	543	544	548	556
Northamptonshire	505	514	517	522	525
Northumbria	414	390	388	379	376
North Wales	484	479	479	470	470
North Yorkshire	518	549	534	540	542
Nottinghamshire	436	444	445	444	455
South Wales	417	414	413	414	420
South Yorkshire	429	413	413	410	411
Staffordshire	483	477	475	463	467
Suffolk	548	561	556	562	565
Surrey	451	480	488	488	486
Sussex	479	477	489	490	509
Thames Valley	527	559	563	552	550
Warwickshire	492	541	551	545	545
West Mercia	539	548	554	560	556
West Midlands	378	372	372	368	365
West Yorkshire	404	405	402	409	417
Wiltshire	473	514	514	518	522
England	404	414	417	417	419
Wales	447	443	444	442	443
E & W (excl. Met)	449	452	453	452	454
England & Wales	406	416	418	418	420

Young Offenders (Psychiatric Assistance)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what representations he has received about the length of delays for transferring individuals from young offenders institutions who have been assessed as requiring psychiatric assistance; and if he will make a statement. [63675]

Mr. George Howarth: I am not aware of any representations. Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons has, in his Inspection Reports, drawn attention to problems about the availability of hospital places for prisoners needing that level of psychiatric care. The Government's plans for addressing these problems are set out in the Department of Health White Paper "Modernising Mental Health Services—Safe, fair and supportive".

Prisoner Programmes

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what was the level of purposeful activity per week undertaken by prisoners, broken down into *(a)* education, *(b)* work, *(c)* training and *(d)* rehabilitation programmes in each of the last five years for which figures are available; and if he will make a statement. [63671]

Mr. George Howarth: Information on the average weekly time spent by purposeful activity in each of the last five years is given in the table.

Average hours purposeful activity per prisoner per week

	Work	Education and Training
1998–99 to date	12.9	3.9
1997–98	13.3	4.1
1996–97	13.5	4.3
1995–96	14.3	4.9
1994–95	14.5	5.2

Note:
Work is defined as time spent in support to works and maintenance staff, workshops, farms, gardens, kitchens and other domestic work. Information on Education and Training activities are combined. The year to October information for 1998–99 is provisional and subject to validation by Prisons. The Prison Service does not record separately time spent engaged in rehabilitation programmes.

Police Budgets (Pensions)

Mr. Beith: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what percentage of each police force budget has been spent on pensions in each of the last three years; what estimate he has made of the average proportion of police budgets which will be spent on pensions in each of the next three years; and if he will make a statement. [63673]

Mr. Boateng: The information requested in respect of years 1996–97 to 1998–99 is set out in the table. Information on police authority budgets and pension costs for the next three years is not available. Police authority budgets are not set until the beginning of each year following the revenue settlement announced by the Government. Pension costs will in part be influenced by retirements in each preceding year.

Net police pension costs

Force	1996–97 Net pensions costs	1996–97 £000 Net revenue expenditure	1996–97 % of net expenditure	1997–98 Net pensions costs	1997–98 £000 Estimated net expenditure	1997–98 % of net expenditure	1998–99 Net pensions costs	1998–99 £000 Estimated net expenditure	1998–99 % of net expenditure
Avon and Somerset	22,122	152,087	14.5	24,741	160,658	15.4	26,877	167,417	16.1
Bedfordshire	5,422	56,627	9.6	5,997	59,787	10.0	6,982	62,317	11.2
Cambridgeshire	7,140	65,024	11.0	8,597	69,286	12.4	8,463	71,230	11.9
Cheshire	7,917	94,177	8.4	9,470	101,787	9.3	11,580	106,523	10.9
City of London	6,636	57,317	11.6	7,205	61,691	11.7	8,291	60,862	13.6
Cleveland	8,694	73,108	11.9	9,451	78,893	12.0	11,108	82,282	13.5
Cumbria	7,307	56,856	12.9	8,138	59,990	13.6	8,715	63,000	13.8
Derbyshire	11,075	90,420	12.2	12,430	96,211	12.9	13,788	100,894	13.7
Devon and Cornwall	19,006	150,392	12.6	20,343	158,010	12.9	23,165	167,117	13.9
Dorset	7,618	67,831	11.2	8,225	70,043	11.7	9,486	73,497	12.9
Durham	8,233	68,035	12.1	9,121	73,698	12.4	10,166	78,103	13.0
Dyfed Powys	5,979	47,869	12.5	6,519	50,481	12.9	6,926	52,609	13.2
Essex	14,785	151,412	9.8	16,300	161,020	10.1	19,361	168,889	11.5
Gloucestershire	7,978	58,420	13.7	8,489	60,795	14.0	9,138	63,780	14.3
Greater Manchester	47,275	341,170	13.9	50,089	355,133	14.1	59,380	371,497	16.0
Gwent	5,735	57,742	9.9	8,144	65,162	12.5	7,712	67,919	11.4
Hampshire	16,432	172,845	9.5	18,499	182,512	10.1	20,009	190,920	10.5
Hertfordshire	7,930	88,863	8.9	8,421	93,952	9.0	9,499	97,859	9.7
Humberside	10,849	99,719	10.9	12,428	107,800	11.5	13,584	111,587	12.2
Kent	14,601	161,625	9.0	19,427	170,625	11.4	20,867	178,916	11.7
Lancashire	22,481	161,865	13.9	22,650	171,341	13.2	24,802	178,051	13.9
Leicestershire	10,273	92,853	11.1	11,754	97,454	12.1	12,566	102,707	12.2
Lincolnshire	7,792	61,508	12.7	8,546	65,776	13.0	10,057	68,322	14.7
Merseyside	35,211	221,172	15.9	39,256	235,027	16.7	37,483	245,277	15.3
Metropolitan Police	170,677	1,683,181	10.1	172,780	1,706,602	10.1	210,438	1,778,001	11.8
Norfolk	9,832	75,547	13.0	11,376	80,766	14.1	10,148	82,339	12.3
North Wales	8,829	68,266	12.9	10,223	72,039	14.2	11,138	75,075	14.8
North Yorkshire	9,515	67,042	14.2	11,976	73,456	16.3	12,162	75,638	16.1
Northamptonshire	5,677	59,252	9.6	6,937	64,773	10.7	7,067	67,134	10.5
Northumbria	27,649	186,410	14.8	28,670	195,287	14.7	31,500	205,380	15.3
Nottinghamshire	12,912	113,591	11.4	14,651	119,682	12.2	16,355	124,828	13.1
South Wales	20,376	147,458	13.8	22,745	156,800	14.5	24,861	163,430	15.2
South Yorkshire	13,065	150,949	8.7	16,700	162,950	10.2	17,248	168,205	10.3
Staffordshire	15,465	107,832	14.3	15,446	115,250	13.4	22,383	122,540	18.3
Suffolk	7,973	60,963	13.1	8,550	64,770	13.2	8,385	65,785	12.7
Surrey	8,478	85,345	9.9	10,414	90,735	11.5	11,021	90,738	12.1
Sussex	19,702	150,626	13.1	22,624	156,390	14.5	24,846	162,664	15.3
Thames Valley Police	17,256	201,397	8.6	18,733	212,162	8.8	20,306	221,147	9.2
Warwickshire	4,252	49,686	8.9	6,191	51,451	12.0	6,201	53,617	11.6
West Mercia	10,567	102,078	10.4	11,496	107,701	10.7	12,458	112,879	11.0
West Midlands	34,530	337,992	10.2	42,150	357,166	11.8	42,831	372,296	11.5
West Yorkshire	31,132	265,233	11.7	34,259	273,211	12.5	37,555	280,739	13.4
Wiltshire	7,828	59,993	13.0	6,431	65,250	9.9	7,480	66,666	11.2
Total	754,206	6,619,778	11.4	826,592	6,933,574	11.9	924,388	7,220,676	12.8

Source:
Taken from actual revenue expenditure figures in the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy statistics (1996–97), and CIPFA estimates of revenue expenditure (1997–98 and 1998–99)

Sexual Offences

Mr. Cox: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prosecutions there have been in the United Kingdom for sexual offences committed against children by United Kingdom nationals in countries overseas in the past three years; and if he will make a statement. [64120]

Mr. Boateng: Part II of the Sex Offenders Act 1997 provides the courts with jurisdiction to deal in this country with British citizens who commit certain sexual offences against children abroad. This Act came into effect in September last year. There have been no prosecutions under the Act. However, it was always expected that the Act would be used only as a last resort where a country will not prosecute an alleged offender or where the United Kingdom cannot extradite that person. Prosecutions under Part II of the Act will always be difficult because of the problems of obtaining evidence from abroad to present to a court in this country in relation to offences committed abroad.

The Government are committed to dealing with the evil of the commercial sexual exploitation of children. This

requires more than having appropriate legislation in place. As part of the Government's comprehensive strategy, the United Kingdom is fully participating in international action to deal with the problem and has shared intelligence and expertise and the training skills of our police with other Governments. These measures demonstrate our commitment to tackling this problem seriously.

Ministerial Visits

Mr. Lidington: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many official visits *(a)* he and *(b)* the Ministers in his Department, have made to Buckinghamshire since 2 May 1997; and if he will list them. [64127]

Mr. Straw: The information is as follows:

Minister	*Date*	*Destination*	*Reason for official visit*
Home Secretary	3 September 1997	Aylesbury	Official visit to Thames Valley Police
	6 January 1998	Aylesbury	Her Majesty's Prison, Grendon
Mr. Alun Michael	5 June 1998	Aylesbury	Visit to Thames Valley Police Restorative Conference
	5 October 1998	Aylesbury	National Crime Beat Awards
Mrs. Joyce Quin	14 January 1998	Aylesbury	Her Majesty's Prison, Grendon

CS Sprays

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if his Department collates statistics on the number of times each police force has used CS sprays in public since January 1996. [63930]

Mr. Boateng: The information is not held centrally.

Mr. Livingstone: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many studies have been performed into solvents as potential alternatives to CS sprays; which agency or organisation carried out each study; and when each study was completed. [63928]

Mr. Boateng: A study was commissioned from the Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment at the Defence Evaluation and Research Agency, an agency of the Minister of Defence (DERA CBDE) by the Home Office Police Scientific Development Branch (PSDB) to compare the toxicology of Methyl Iso-butyl Ketone (MIBK) with other solvents. This study was completed in 1996.

A literature review was commissioned from DERA CBDE by PSDB to consider potential suitable alternative solvents to MIBK. This study was completed in 1997.

PSDB have a programme to identify possible alternative solvents. This work is currently in progress.

Conspiracy Convictions

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many persons have been *(a)* arrested, *(b)* charged and *(c)* convicted of conspiracy in the UK to commit offences abroad. [64203]

Mr. Boateng: Information on the number of people arrested and charged by type of offence is not collected centrally.

Section 5 of the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998—Conspiracy to commit offences outside the United Kingdom—came into effect on 4 September 1998, and information on convictions from the Home Office Court Proceedings Database will begin to become available in the Spring of 1999.

Specified Organisation

Mr. McNamara: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department on how many occasions *(a)* the opinion of a senior police officer has been given in court as evidence of a person's membership of a specified organisation and *(b)* a court has been asked to draw an inference from the failure of a person suspected of belonging to a specified organisation to mention a relevant fact; how many persons have been (i) charged and (ii) convicted of belonging to a specified organisation since September 1998; and on how many occasions a court has ordered forfeiture of property following conviction for belonging to a specified organisation. [64202]

Mr. Boateng: Our records indicate that since the Criminal Justice (Terrorism and Conspiracy) Act 1998 came into force on 4 September, there have been no such cases in England and Wales.

Fire Service (Pensions)

Mr. Paul Marsden: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department when he expects to make an announcement on the future of pensions for the Fire Service; and if he will make a statement. [64083]

Mr. George Howarth: Following the review of the fire pension scheme, I expect to publish proposals early in the New Year.

Birmingham Northern Relief Road (Policing)

Ms Walley: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department what is the liability of MEL in respect of the policing costs arising from the Birmingham Northern Relief Road; and if he will make a statement. [63910]

Mr. Boateng: We would normally expect the cost of policing operations such as the construction of the Birmingham Northern Relief Road to be met by forces from within their existing budgets. Nevertheless, we are considering bids for extra funding from the three forces concerned in respect of their estimated additional costs.

I understand from the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions that there is no liability on MEL to meet the policing costs of constructing and operating the Birmingham Northern Relief Road.

Age of Consent

Mr. Donald Anderson: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many letters he has received since 1 May 1997 *(a)* in favour of and *(b)* opposed to lowering the age of consent for homosexual acts to 16 years; and how many replies have been sent in a standard form. [64279]

Mr. Boateng: Since 1 May 1997, the Home Office has received approximately 20,000 letters about lowering the homosexual age of consent to 16. Around 3,500 of these were letters to the Prime Minister.

No detailed records are kept of correspondents' views on this issue. However, the majority of those received following the failure of the amendment to lower the homosexual age of consent in the summer were in support of lowering the age of consent. The large majority of those received in the run up to the Queen's Speech in November were against lowering the age of consent.

In view of the large volume of correspondence on this one issue and in order to ensure that replies to the public are sent out as quickly as possible, it has been necessary to use a comprehensive response which makes clear the Government's position on this matter.

Illegal Immigrants

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) what has been the cost to (i) Devon County Council and (ii) Plymouth City Council of maintaining illegal immigrants from Plymouth Ferry Port in each of the last three years; [64258]

(2) what has been the cost to *(a)* Hampshire County Council and *(b)* Portsmouth City Council of maintaining illegal immigrants from Portsmouth Ferry Port in each of the last three years. [64259]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: This information is not available to the Home Office. The hon. Member should approach the local authorities.

Illegal immigrants who do not claim asylum and who have no special needs are not eligible for support from public funds. Asylum seekers and other illegal immigrants (who are given temporary leave to enter) who are not otherwise detained and who are able to support themselves are free to live within the United Kingdom in a place of their own choosing. Asylum seekers who register their application for asylum at their port of entry may be eligible for Income Support and Housing Benefit and can then find their own accommodation. Asylum seekers who do not qualify for benefits but who may be supported under the terms of the National Assistance Act 1948 or the Children Act 1989 are supported by local authorities under the terms of that legislation. The Home Office currently has no direct role in providing support and is consequently not aware of the information sought. The Government plan a fundamental reform of the asylum and immigration laws to remove cash benefits and more strictly control where asylum seekers live.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many citizens of Slovakia are currently being detained in the UK as illegal immigrants; and what were the equivalent figures for each of the last three years. [64256]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: I will write to the hon. Member.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many illegal immigrants at Dover Ferry Port have been refused entry and removed from the UK within seven days of arrival in each of the last 12 months. [64253]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information on the numbers of persons removed or departing voluntarily within 7 days of being issued with a notice of illegal entry by the South East Ports Surveillance Team at Dover, between 1 July 1997 and 30 June 1998 is: 38 persons in July 1997; 38 in August 1997; 19 in September 1997; 23 in October 1997; 11 in November 1997; 23 in December 1997; 8 in January 1998; 5 in February 1998; 13 in March 1998; 12 in April 1998; 6 in May 1998; and 7 in June 1998. The data are provisional.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many illegal immigrants at Harwich Ferry Port have been granted political asylum in each of the last 12 months. [64252]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is that no more than two persons who had been issued with notice of illegal entry by immigration officials at Harwich were granted asylum in the 12 months from 1 July 1997 to 30 June 1998. The data are provisional.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many illegal immigrants at *(a)* Newhaven, *(b)* Plymouth, *(c)* Poole and *(d)* Portsmouth ferry ports have been granted political asylum in each of the last 12 months. [64237]

Mr. Mike O'Brien *[holding answer 16 December 1998]:* The available information is that no persons issued with notice of illegal entry at Newhaven, Plymouth, Poole or Portsmouth were granted asylum in the 12 months from 1 July 1997 to 30 June 1998.

Mr. Hancock: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many illegal immigrants who arrived at Poole Ferry Port are currently being detained; and what were the equivalent figures for each of the last six months. [64254]

Mr. Mike O'Brien: The available information is that, as at 15 December 1998, no more than two persons who had been served with a notice of illegal entry by immigration officials at Poole were detained solely under Immigration Act powers. Information relating to the previous six months could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Prisoners (Hunger Strikes)

Mr. Gordon Prentice: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department how many prisoners have embarked on a hunger strike in each year since 1987; and how many *(a)* died and *(b)* gave up but suffered permanent damage to their health. [64261]

Mr. George Howarth: Definitions and methods of recording this type of incidents have changed over time, and the Prison Service has employed the broader definition of "food refusal" since 1989. Information on incidence of food refusal prior to 1989 is not held centrally. The number of reported incidents of food refusal for each calendar year since 1989 is given in the

table. It should be noted that the figures may include a number of incidents concerning the same prisoner. Three prisoners have died as a result of food refusal during this period.

Information on prisoners who ceased refusing food, but then suffered permanent damage to their health could only be obtained at disproportionate cost.

Food refusals in prison custody: 1989–1998[1]

Year	*Number of reported incidents*
1989	60
1990	78
1991	90
1992	145
1993	220
1994	306
1995	225
1996	193
1997	222
1998	198[1]

[1] Figures as at 14 December 1998

Note:
To be recorded as a food refusal the period of refusal must exceed one day.

Police (Deaf People)

Mr. Levitt: To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department (1) if his Department will issue guidance to police forces on the importance of recording on video interviews with criminal suspects whose first or preferred language is British Sign Language; [64229]

(2) what plans he has to issue guidance about improving communication between deaf people and the police following the research report by the Home Office Police Research Group, Police and Deaf People: A Lack Of Communication. [64230]

Mr. Boateng: The report "Police and Deaf People: A Lack of Communication" was written by a police officer and published under the Police Research Award Scheme (PRAS) run by the Home Office. All PRAS publications carry a disclaimer that the recommendations are the views of the author and not necessarily those of the Home Office nor of the author's force. The report has been distributed to all United Kingdom police forces. It is for individual chief officers to decide whether the recommendations should be taken up.

It is open to chief officers to implement the recommendation in the report to video record interviews with deaf suspects where they have video recording equipment and where the suspect consents to this.

The Codes of Practice issued under the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984, which regulate the conduct of police interviews with suspects, contain a number of safeguards for suspects who are deaf. These include the requirement for an interpreter and for a contemporaneous written note of the interview to be made as well as an audio tape recording.

Home Office seminars are due to take place in Spring 1999 for key police personnel about the implementation of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995, including dealing with people with hearing difficulties.

TREASURY

Public Services

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he will publish public service agreements concerning the modernisation, accountability and reform of public services; and if he will make a statement. [64968]

Mr. Byers: We are today publishing a White Paper, "Public Services for the Future: Modernisation, Reform, Accountability" (Cm 4181).

National Savings

Ms Lawrence: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will make a statement about National Savings. [64790]

Ms Hewitt: National Savings has been carrying out a wide ranging programme to modernise the organisation against the background of a fast moving and highly competitive retail savings market. This has included the evaluation of a service contract in the form of a public private partnership for operational services delivery. After detailed consideration and discussion with those involved I can announce that I have accepted the recommendation of the National Savings Management Board and given it the authority to sign a contract with Siemens Business Services. The contract will be awarded for 15 years (with a break of 10 years) and there are considerable safeguards to ensure it will serve the public interest, including rigorous standards for customer service.

This contract between National Savings and Siemens Business Services is a milestone in the Government's policy of public private partnership. It will create a new Public Service Partnership, bringing together the strengths of the two organisations to deliver real benefits to all the stakeholders involved. The public interest will be served through better service to National Savings customers, savings to the taxpayer and wider opportunities for staff. And Siemens Business Services will benefit by taking on first-rate staff who will help them build their business in the growing field of business service.

Key features of the deal are the introduction of private sector capital and expertise which will help National Savings modernise its systems and processes, and so provide more choice to customers; a commitment by Siemens Business Services to a continual programme of customer improvements; a reduction in National Savings ongoing running costs. To offset the reduction in National Savings' operational jobs stemming from the Agency's ongoing programme of investment in new technology Siemens Business Services plans to introduce new work to each of the National Savings' sites in Blackpool, Durham and Glasgow. The outlook therefore is for a materially greater number of jobs than would have been the case without the appointment of a private sector partner. Amongst the safeguards we have negotiated are a significant commitment to job creation, with an undertaking in any event to maintain a National Savings presence in each of the three locations for at least the next five years.

National Savings staff, most of whom are employed in operational services, are being told of my decision today. The operational staff will transfer employment to Siemens

Business Services on 1 April 1999. Under TUPE, staff terms and conditions of employment are guaranteed and cannot be changed without negotiation between Siemens Business Services and the staff through their appointed Trade Unions.

National Savings' products will continue to be guaranteed by the Government who remain responsible for key decisions, including setting interest rates and terms and conditions of new products. National Savings remain in control over all key processes relating to the management of its market leading business—including policy, product design and delivering and pricing. The Chief Executive of the National Savings Executive Agency, who is also the Director of National Savings, will remain fully accountable to Ministers and to Parliament for National Savings.

This contract is in keeping with the Government's policy for public private partnerships and for modernising public services so they serve the interests of all stakeholders. This Public Service Partnership offers significant benefits to National Savings' customers and staff, and to the taxpayer, as well as to the local economies concerned.

Film Industry (Tax Relief)

Ms Roseanna Cunningham: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effectiveness of the tax relief measures for film makers introduced in 1997; what plans he has for changes to these measures; and if he will make a statement. [64451]

Dawn Primarolo: We are continuing to assess the effectiveness of the tax measures introduced in 1997, but first indications are that it is working well. It would of course be improper for me to anticipate what may or may not be in my right hon. Friend the Chancellor's Budget.

International Debt

Mr. Simon Hughes: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what progress has been made on agreeing international debt relief since the G8 summit in Birmingham last May. [62751]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 16 December 1998]:* At the Annual Meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the Chancellor secured agreement on his efforts to maintain momentum towards meeting his Mauritius Mandate targets. Specifically it was agreed: to extend the Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) initiative from September 1998 to the end of 2000; to allow IMF post conflict assistance programmes to count towards a country's track record under the HIPC initiative; to move forward quickly on further proposals which recognise the special needs of post conflict countries, especially those with arrears to the International Financial Institutions; and to hold a wide-ranging review of the HIPC initiative in 1999.

The United Kingdom has recently been at the forefront of international efforts to help maintain the debt service burdens of those countries devastated by Hurricane Mitch. Following UK proposals, the International Financial Institutions have recently set up a trust fund for assistance to meet the multi-lateral debt service obligations of Nicaragua and Honduras. Last week the Paris Club of official bilateral creditors agreed Honduras and Nicaragua should not have to make payments to their bilateral creditors over the next three years.

Euro-Preparations Committee

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will set out the full remit of the new Euro-Preparations Committee; and if he will make a statement. [63556]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The remit will be to act as a channel for the exchange of information and to develop cross-party awareness of the continuing preparations for the Euro.

Taxation

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to his oral statement of 9 December 1998, *Official Report*, column 396, if he will make a statement on his definition of a harmful tax measure. [64024]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The Code of Conduct, which was adopted by the Council of Finance Ministers on 1 December 1997, sets out the criteria against which potentially harmful tax measures should be assessed. The Code of Conduct was published in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* on 6 January 1998. This journal is available from the House of Commons Library.

Working Families Tax Credit

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer which elements of his proposed working families tax credit he was advised required primary legislation. [62952]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 8 December 1998]:* All the elements of the WFTC will require some primary legislation but, as with Family Credit currently, detailed rules will mainly be included in secondary legislation. In those cases the primary legislation will give the Treasury or the Inland Revenue the power to make the regulations.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate how many families with earnings above £20,000 will be eligible for an element of the Working Families Tax Credit. [63512]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* A reliable estimate of the number of families with earnings above £20,000 who will be eligible for the Working Families Tax Credit is not available.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the maximum earnings level at which the total amount payable in Working Families Tax Credit would exceed the total amount payable in income tax and employee and employer national insurance contributions for each of the following family types *(a)* married couples with a (A) one child at secondary school, (B) one child at secondary school and one child at primary school and (C) two children at secondary school and one child at primary school and *(b)* a lone parent with (1) one child at secondary school, (2) one child at secondary school and one child at primary school and (3) two children at secondary school and one child at primary school

assuming (i) no childcare expenditure and (ii) childcare expenditure at the average level for those with childcare expenditure. [63416]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* Any family with children with someone working full-time will not have any net income tax to pay on earnings under £220 a week.

Figures for a single earner working at least 30 hours who is paying national insurance contributions at the contracted-out rate and with no childcare expenditure are given in the table. The figures apply to both couples and lone parents.

	Maximum weekly earnings at which the total amount of Working Families Tax Credit exceeds income tax and employee and employer national insurance contributions for 1999–2000 (£)
(A) 1 child aged 11–15	195
(B) 1 child aged 11–15 and 1 child aged under 11	214
(C) 2 children aged 11–15 and 1 child aged under 11	241

Note:
Estimates of the average expenditure on childcare are not available, and hence it is not possible to give equivalent figures assuming average expenditure on childcare.

Mr. Webb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will estimate the *(a)* number and *(b)* proportion of recipients of Working Families Tax Credit who will have expenditures on registered childcare, and the average expenditure among those with such expenditures. [63417]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The latest estimate of the cost of the childcare tax credit in the Working Families Tax Credit is £200 million in 2000–01, the first full year of the tax credit. This estimate is based on assumptions of the likely take-up of the childcare tax credit and it is not possible to provide reliable estimates of the numbers who will have expenditures on registered charities.

European Economy

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Carmarthen, East and Dinefwr (Mr. Williams) on 10 December 1998, *Official Report*, column *298*, on the European economy, if he will place a copy of the Government's progress reports on product and capital markets in the Library. [64334]

Ms Hewitt: A copy of the first UK Progress Report on Product, Services and Capital Markets has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

ECOFIN (Tax Harmonisation)

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer, pursuant to the answer to the hon. Member for Clydesdale (Mr. Hood) of 10 December 1997, *Official Report*, column *297*, on ECOFIN, if he will place copies of *(a)* the Code of Conduct Group first interim report to ECOFIN, *(b)* the EU Commission's first combined first annual report on the implementation of the Code of Conduct for Business Taxation and fiscal state aid, *(c)* the progress report for the EU Commission on work concerning the taxation of income from savings and a common system of taxation from interest and royalty payments between associated companies and *(d)* the draft mandate for a study on company taxation, in the Library. [64335]

Dawn Primarolo: The Commission document containing the First Annual Report on the implementation of the Code of Conduct for Business Taxation and Fiscal State Aid and the Progress report on the work concerning the taxation of income from savings and a common system of taxation for interest and royalty payments between associated companies, was formally deposited in Parliament on 4 December 1998.

The Code of Conduct Group's first interim report to ECOFIN is confidential. The draft mandate has been withdrawn.

European Code of Conduct Group

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) when he plans to provide a substantive answer to the question from the hon. Member for Bognor Regis and Littlehampton on proposals from the Code of Conduct Group (Ref. 62330); [64336]

(2) if he will define harmful tax competition in the context of the EU. [63513]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* The Code of Conduct, which was adopted by the Council of Finance Ministers on 1 December 1997, sets out the criteria against which potentially harmful tax measures should be assessed. The Code of Conduct was published in the *Official Journal of the European Communities* on 6 January 1998. This journal is available from the House of Commons Library.

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many current proposals are being considered by the Code of Conduct Group to tackle harmful tax competition; and if he will list them. [62342]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The Code of Conduct is required to assess measures referred to it by Member States. The UK Government have five measures listed: International Headquarters Companies; special tax measures for the film industry; enterprise zones; 100 per cent. first year capital allowances for SMEs in Northern Ireland; and rollover relief for balancing charges arising on the disposal of ships. This does not imply that the measures are actually harmful under the terms of the Code. Discussions on these and the other measures are proceeding. International Holding Companies are due to be abolished in April next year following decisions made. The Government are confident that the other four UK measures are not actually harmful within the meaning of the Code and are robustly making that case. The Government are not at liberty to give details of other Member States' listed measures as the work of the Group is confidential according to Council Conclusions which all Member States agreed in March 1998.

Third-world Debt

Mr. Goggins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer how many CAFOD Fair Deal on Third World Debt Postcards he has received. [63373]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 15 December 1998]:* The Chancellor of the Exchequer has received approximately 18,000 CAFOD Fair Deal on Third World Postcards this calendar year.

Productivity Gap

Mr. Heathcoat-Amory: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the seminars and the dates on which they were held on bridging the productivity gap referred to on page 12 of the Economic and Fiscal Strategy report 1998. [63840]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 17 December 1998]:* Eight seminars have been held on the following themes:

Thursday 14 May—Overview seminar

Thursday 11 June—Entrepreneurship

Thursday 25 June—Case study of the automotive industry

Thursday 23 July—Innovation and technology

Tuesday 28 July—Management

Wednesday 16 September—Case study of the software industry

Tuesday 22 September—Skills

Tuesday 20 October—Finance for investment

Correspondence

Mr. Salmond: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when the Paymaster General intends to reply to the letter of 20 July from the hon. Member for Banff and Buchan regarding his constituent Mr. Hutchison. [63649]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 14 December 1998]:* A reply to the hon. Member's letter has been issued.

Tax Havens

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list current proposals from the Code of Conduct Group to tackle harmful tax competition from tax haven jurisdictions; and if he will list the jurisdictions concerned. [62330]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* Under the Code Member States have committed themselves to promoting the principles of the Code in third countries and in territories to which the treaty does not apply. Member States with dependent or associated territories will do so, within the framework of their constitutional arrangements.

Charities

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the effect of the proposal for a common EU withholding tax on the UK charities sector. [62335]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The draft EC directive on taxation of savings would only affect charities if they borrow from individual investors overseas. It would not apply to interest paid to a charity.

EU Withholding Tax

Mr. Gibb: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the financial services other than Eurobonds which will be affected by the current proposal for a common EU withholding tax. [62333]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* The draft EC directive on taxation of savings would apply to cross-border payments of interest to individuals in the EC.

Sir Teddy Taylor: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if the current proposals in the EU on the withholding tax make provision for exemptions for financial centres, with particular reference to *(a)* Luxembourg and *(b)* Dublin. [62516]

Dawn Primarolo *[holding answer 7 December 1998]:* There is no provision in the draft Directive on taxation of savings for any such exemption.

Tax Records

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer (1) if he will list the implementation milestones with their dates for the introduction of the online tax records information system; and to what extent these have been achieved to date; [64418]

(2) how much is planned to be spent up to 1 April 1999 on the online tax records and information system and its related computer installation; and how much has been planned for the next three year period. [64416]

Dawn Primarolo: The Inland Revenue currently has no plans to introduce an 'online tax records information system'.

Departmental Staff (Retirement)

Mr. Cousins: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is the policy of the Inland Revenue to enforce retirement of its staff at age 60 years. [64414]

Dawn Primarolo: Since 1993 the normal retirement age for everyone in the Inland Revenue has been 60 and this applies to both men and women. The Department's policy is that a decision to retain someone to work beyond 60 would be based on a business need, not on any personal consideration. So, only where there is an exceptional operational need, for example when a particular skill cannot quickly be replaced, is an exception allowed.

Pensions

Mrs. Curtis-Thomas: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what plans he has to make the lump sum element of a pension taxable. [64251]

Ms Hewitt: The Government's policy on pensions is set out in the Green Paper "A New Contract for Welfare: partnership in pensions" published on 15 December 1998. Copies have been placed in the Library.

Collective Investment Schemes

Mr. Flight: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer when he expects to publish the draft provisions on collective investment schemes to be included in the Financial Services and Markets Bill; and what opportunity there will be for interested parties to comment on the proposed regulations. [64291]

Ms Hewitt: There will be an opportunity for interested parties to comment when the relevant provisions have been drafted.

Public Engagements (Ministers)

Mr. Maude: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the public engagements undertaken since 1 October by *(a)* him, *(b)* the Chief Secretary, *(c)* the Paymaster General, *(d)* the Financial Secretary and *(e)* the Economic Secretary. [63239]

Ms Hewitt: Treasury Ministers have undertaken numerous public engagements since 1 October.

Third World Debt

Mr. Cox: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list the debt burden of each of the 10 poorest countries in the world. [63338]

Ms Hewitt: World Bank data in its 1998–99 World Development Report show the following external debt burdens for the 10 poorest countries:

$ billion

Country	*External debt*
Mozambique	5.8
Ethiopia	10.0
Democratic Republic Congo	12.8
Burundi	1.1
Sierra Leone	1.1
Niger	1.5
Tanzania	7.4
Rwanda	1.0
Nepal	2.4
Malawi	2.3

The accuracy of these data should be treated with caution due to the poor data collection and reporting mechanisms of many poor countries.

Euro Preparations Unit

Mr. Bercow: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will place in the Library the minutes of meetings of the Euro Preparations Unit since 27 January 1998. [64187]

Ms Hewitt: The Standing Committee on EMU preparations met for the first time on 27 January 1998. Minutes of its meetings are routinely placed in the House Library.

Human Rights

Dr. Cable: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what assessment he has made of the compatibility of the disciplinary provisions contained in the proposed Financial Services and Markets Bill with the European Convention on Human Rights in the form in which the Convention will be incorporated into the United Kingdom law under the Human Rights Act 1998, with particular reference to Article 6 of the Convention. [64086]

Ms Hewitt: It is the Government's intention that the Financial Services and Markets Bill will be compatible with the Convention rights.

New Cars (EU)

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each country in the EU the percentage tax or taxes paid on the price of a new car by the citizens of *(a)* that country and *(b)* other countries. [64201]

Dawn Primarolo: This information is not held.

EU Budget

Mr. William Ross: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if he will list for each country in the European Union for each of the last 10 years and the current year (i) their net contribution, (ii) their net receipts from the EU Budget, (iii) what percentage these sums represented of the GDP of each nation in each year and (iv) what each sum in each case was in pounds sterling per capita of the country's population. [64194]

Ms Hewitt: The requested information is shown in the tables.

Table 1—Net contributions by Member States 1988–97 (million European currency units)

Country	*1988*	*1989*	*1990*	*1991*	*1992*	*1993*	*1994*	*1995*	*1996*	*1997*
Belgium[1]	*5.0*	*1,123.9*	*773.9*	*–416.6*	*–165.5*	*–59.6*	*309.3*	*311.2*	*746.2*	*989.7*
Denmark	–330.6	–174.2	–422.5	–346.3	–276.6	–376.9	–198.9	–305.7	–193.4	–24.0
Germany	6,107.2	6,530.6	5,550.4	8,796.8	9,697.6	11,830.3	13,637.1	13,431.0	10,894.9	11,228.1
Greece	–1,491.6	–1,998.2	–2,470.2	–2,926.4	–3,604.0	–4,136.7	–3,851.9	–3,488.9	–3,932.7	–4,194.0
Spain	–1,334.2	30.7	–1,711.3	–2,294.6	–2,739.6	–3,090.4	–3,116.6	–7,218.1	–5,972.2	–5,850.5
France	1,780.9	2,946.3	1,804.9	2,449.5	1,443.6	1,019.6	2,626.4	1,727.2	459.8	985.0
Ireland	–1,159.3	–1,340.8	–1,892.5	–2,357.3	–2,140.1	–2,371.9	–1,752.0	–1,886.9	–2,260.3	–2,623.6
Italy	–124.2	1,428.8	416.7	1,388.6	504.3	1,525.4	2,540.4	614.1	1,402.3	323.1
Luxembourg[1]	*67.4*	*64.6*	*60.0*	*–159.7*	*–164.0*	*–189.6*	*–253.7*	*44.8*	*79.3*	*64.6*
Netherlands	–1,150.0	–1,129.4	–368.4	537.9	829.0	1,326.6	1,829.9	2,004.7	2,446.8	2,348.7
Austria	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	905.1	272.2	792.8
Portugal	–514.9	–487.2	–600.8	–1,516.2	–2,139.9	–2,508.4	–1,827.0	–2,381.1	–2,774.3	–2,612.3

Table 1—Net contributions by Member States 1988–97 (million European currency units)

Country	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Finland	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	164.6	–27.1	–4.7
Sweden	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	937.3	752.5	1,226.8
UK	2,070.0	3,353.8	3,386.9	666.9	2,387.8	3,125.8	1,158.8	4,720.2	2,276.0	1,833.7

[1] See note below on Belgium and Luxembourg net contribution.

Note:

A negative figure indicates that the Member State is a net recipient.

The table above has been compiled from the annual reports of the European Court of Auditors. These reports do not attribute all EC spending between Member States, and so do not provide a full picture of net contributions. In particular the effects of administration spending are understated. Before 1995 the Court took account of part of administration spending. Since that date their reports have adopted a revised format which excludes administration spending completely. This change means that the figures for 1995–97 are not wholly comparable with those for 1988–94.

Most EC administration spending is disbursed in Belgium or Luxembourg. The figures above for those countries must therefore be treated with considerable caution (and are shown in italics). Figures for 1992–97 only have been published by the Commission in their report on the Operation of the Own Resources System (ref 11666/98). These figures which do not take account of all administration spending, show that, for instance, in 1997 the net receipts from the EC Budget on Belgium and Luxembourg were 1,080 mecus and 725 mecus respectively.

Source:

Court of Auditors Reports

Table 2—The percentage of Member States GDP accounted for by the net contribution or receipt

Country	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Belgium[1]	*0.76*	*0.79*	*0.50*	*–.026*	*–0.10*	*–0.03*	*0.16*	*0.15*	*0.36*	*0.46*
Denmark	–0.36	–0.18	–0.42	–0.33	–0.25	–0.33	–0.16	–0.23	–0.14	–0.02
Germany	0.60	0.61	0.47	0.63	0.64	0.72	0.79	0.73	0.59	0.61
Greece	–2.73	–3.28	–3.78	–4.06	–4.74	–5.26	–4.64	–3.97	–4.06	–3.97
Spain	–0.46	0.01	–0.44	–0.54	–0.61	–0.76	–0.77	–1.69	–1.30	–1.25
France	0.22	0.34	0.19	0.25	0.14	0.10	0.23	0.15	0.04	0.08
Ireland	–3.93	–4.08	–5.27	–6.30	–5.31	–5.73	–3.86	–3.82	–4.06	–3.94
Italy	–0.02	0.18	0.05	0.15	0.05	0.18	0.30	0.07	0.15	0.03
Luxembourg[1]	*1.02*	*0.86*	*0.74*	*–1.81*	*–1.67*	*–1.72*	*–2.06*	*0.34*	*0.59*	*0.46*
Netherlands	–0.59	–0.54	–0.16	0.23	0.33	0.50	0.64	0.66	0.78	0.74
Austria	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.51	0.15	0.44
Portugal	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	–3.10	–3.40	–3.07
Finland	–1.26	–1.03	–1.13	–2.45	–3.01	–3.58	–2.56	0.17	–0.03	0.00
Sweden	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	0.53	0.38	0.61
UK	0.29	0.44	0.44	0.08	0.30	0.39	0.13	0.56	0.25	0.16

[1] See note in Table 1 on Belgium and Luxembourg net contribution.

Note:

A negative figure indicates that the Member State is a net recipient.

Source:

GDP figures taken from "European Economy" No 65 (1998), published by the European Commission.

Net Contributions as in Table 1.

Table 3—Net contribution per capita in £s

Country	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997
Belgium[1]	*66.8*	*76.0*	*55.5*	*-29.2*	*-12.1*	*-4.6*	*23.7*	*25.1*	*58.9*	*67.0*
Denmark	-42.8	-22.8	-58.7	-47.0	-39.3	-56.5	-29.6	-47.9	-29.5	-3.1
Germany	66.0	70.7	62.7	77.0	88.3	113.5	129.6	134.7	106.7	94.3
Greece	-99.1	-133.7	-174.9	-200.9	-256.4	-310.3	-285.9	-273.3	-301.4	-274.8
Spain	-22.9	0.5	-31.5	-41.3	-51.6	-61.6	-61.6	-150.8	-122.0	-102.5
France	21.1	35.1	22.7	30.1	18.5	13.8	35.1	24.3	6.3	11.6
Ireland	-218.1	-256.6	-385.6	-468.0	-442.0	-516.7	-378.0	-429.1	-500.0	-493.9
Italy	-1.5	16.9	5.2	17.1	6.5	20.8	34.4	8.8	19.6	3.9
Luxembourg[1]	*119.8*	*114.9*	*112.2*	*-288.8*	*-306.8*	*-370.8*	*-486.1*	*89.5*	*153.1*	*105.8*
Netherlands	-51.8	-51.1	-17.6	25.0	40.1	67.5	92.1	106.2	126.4	103.7
Austria	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	92.1	27.1	67.6
Portugal	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	-198.0	-225.6	-182.3
Finland	-34.6	-33.1	-43.5	-107.6	-159.8	-198.5	-143.7	26.4	-4.2	-0.6
Sweden	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	86.8	67.8	94.8
UK	24.1	39.3	42.0	8.1	30.2	41.8	15.4	66.0	31.1	21.4

[1] See note in Table 1 on Belgium and Luxembourg net contribution.

Note:

A negative figure indicates that the Member State is a net recipient.

Source:

Population figures taken from "European Economy" No 65 (1998), published by the European Commission.

Conversion to £s using the annual average ecu/£ exchange rate.

Net Contributions as in Table 1.

Mr. Gill: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer what is the latest estimate of the total EU budget for the current year; and what percentage of it he estimates will be allocated to CAP expenditure. [63104]

Ms Hewitt: The EC budget for 1998 was set at 83.53 billion ecus, of which 40.44 billion ecus, or 48.4 per cent. was allocated for CAP expenditure. Latest estimates suggest that the final outturn for the overall budget will be very close to budget, although expenditure on the CAP may be some 1 billion ecus below plans. CAP expenditure would therefore account for around 47 per cent. of all expenditure.

Economic and Monetary Union

Mr. Malcolm Bruce: To ask the Chancellor of the Exchequer if it is his policy to seek to increase co-ordination of budgetary and economic policies within EMU in order to promote growth and high employment; and if he will make a statement. [61067]

Ms Hewitt *[holding answer 30 November 1998]:* High levels of growth and employment depend on macroeconomic stability and reform of capital, labour and product markets. The Stability and Growth Pact and Articles 103 and 104c of the Maastricht Treaty provide the basis for co-ordination and surveillance of budgetary and economic policies.

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PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

SIXTH SERIES **VOLUME 322**

SESSION 1998–99

7th December—17th December 1998

SCOPE OF THE INDEX, ARRANGEMENT AND ABBREVIATIONS

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